

Calvinism in Nineteenth-Century America

There was an organization called the Evangelical Lions, which was founded in London in 1846. In 1873, it met in New York City. It was an organization that brought together Christians from different traditions and denominations to promote ecumenical regard for different parts of the body of Christ. When the alliance met in New York City in 1873, Charles Hodge was one of the delegates. He was a professor at Princeton Seminary. In that year, Hodge was already 76 years old. He had been teaching at Princeton for 51 years. He was asked to lead in prayer at the opening of the alliance. One person who was there described Hodge as the most impressive personality of the meeting. This observer said he was a picture of strength and repose with a face both radiant and serene. He carried a gold-headed ebony walking cane, and he leaned on it as he spoke with his many friends and as he rose to offer the opening prayer at the meeting of the alliance. It is part of that prayer that I am going to use now as we begin to study Calvinism in nineteenth-century America. Let us pray.

Come, Holy Spirit, come. Descend in all Thy plentitude of grace. Come as the Spirit of reverence and love. We confess Thee before men. We avow our faith that God is and that He is the creator, preserver, and governor of the world. We acknowledge that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is our God. We confess Christ as God manifest in the flesh and as our only and all-sufficient Savior, who for us sinners died upon the cross to reconcile us unto God and to make expiation for the sins of men. And He, having died for our offenses, has risen again for our justification. We acknowledge Him as now seated at the right hand of the Majesty on high with all power in heaven and on earth having been committed to His hands. Thanks be to God, thanks be to God, that He has put on us, unworthy as we are, the honor to make this confession and to bear this testimony to God and to His Son. O God, look down from heaven upon us. Shed abroad in our hearts the Holy Spirit that we may be truly one in Christ Jesus. To the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost be glory now and evermore. Amen.

As we think of Calvinism in nineteenth-century America, I want to talk first of all about the New England theology. The students of Jonathan Edwards and his followers of course continued to teach the Calvinism that Edwards had taught in his time. But as they did so they also attempted to, as they said, improve it. Unfortunately, those improvements were not real improvements. What happened in New England after the time of Edwards was not a continuation of the strong theology of Jonathan Edwards, but a kind of watering down of the Calvinistic emphases of Edwards. Joseph Bellamy, Samuel Hopkins, Jonathan Edwards, Jr., and Timothy Dwight are all described as being theologians of the New Divinity. With some of those men there was a greater departure from the Calvinism of Edwards than others. But in all of those men there was some adjustment to Calvinism, the Reformed theology that Jonathan Edwards taught so powerfully in his time. From the New Divinity, it is just another step to what is called “The New Haven Theology” of Nathaniel Taylor. So, in the 100 years between the death of Edwards and the death of Taylor, Jonathan Edwards’ Calvinism largely disappeared among his New England followers. In fact, Taylor’s theology comes very close to the kind of Pelagianism that Edwards had attempted to answer during his own lifetime. One of the histories of the New England theology after Edwards is called *From Piety to Moralism: The Passing of the New England Theology* by Joseph Haroutunian. In this book, he describes the history of this period, and he shows how Calvinism, the piety of Jonathan Edwards, declined into a moralistic theology in Edwards’ theological descendents. Haroutunian wrote, “Human depravity and regeneration by the Spirit of God were reconciled with free moral agency and moralized and confused beyond recognition. Such Calvinism was not very objectionable, but it was also not Calvinism.

While that was taking place in New England, one of the New England Puritan centers was slipping away from orthodox Calvinism—that is, Yale and the Edwardsian tradition. The other important New England Puritan center, Harvard College, was rapidly moving away from Christian theism to Unitarianism en route to eventually becoming secularism. In 1805, Harvard appointed a Unitarian to its chair of theology, which was an indication that the old Calvinism would no longer be taught at Harvard as it had been in the early years of the school's existence. Andover Theological Seminary was founded in Massachusetts in 1809 as another place for New England trinitarians to study because of the loss of Harvard to Unitarianism. For some years, Andover was an important center of New England Congregational Calvinism. However, gradually through the nineteenth century, Andover too was influenced by accommodating thought and by the end of the century had moved away from its Calvinist roots. So, as we look at that brief sketch of the New England theology of the nineteenth century, there is much to disappoint us. The place where there had been so much good, so much life, and great Reformed theology taught and preached for generations, was largely lost to the Reformed faith. Another very important center of nineteenth-century Calvinist theology was a small town in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania, which was the location of a seminary of the German Reformed Church. The Mercersburg theology became a second center for theology in America on the Reformed side of things.

While New England was being influenced by American culture and by modern thought, Mercersburg was attempting to return to the creeds of the Reformation and post-Reformation period and to the teaching of the Reformers. There were two teachers at this little seminary in Pennsylvania who are well known. I want to mention each of these men briefly. They were John Nevin and Philip Schaff.

John Nevin was an American trained at Princeton Seminary. He was an Old School Presbyterian. He began to teach at the German Reformed School. He was a theologian. Philip Schaff was born in Switzerland and came from that country to teach at Mercersburg. Later, Schaff became a professor at Union Seminary in New York City and became a Presbyterian. He is primarily known as an historian. Nevin criticized the doctrine of American Calvinism that he felt had been watered down by the Puritan revivalists' subjectivism. He was not someone who supported the revivals in the First or Second Great Awakening. He felt that revivalism was a decline from true Calvinism, and he urged a churchly Calvinism with an emphasis on the sacraments, ministry, catechetical instruction, and liturgy as over against the decision-based revivalism of his time.

One of Nevin's important books criticizing the revivalist movement was the book *The Anxious Bench*, which I think did provide a correction to revival-centered Christianity. I find myself really torn between Nevin's critique of the Revival and appreciation for the Revival. Somewhere between Nevin's critique, which needs to be listened to, and the Revival itself, is the important place for renewal and revival in the American church. Nevin points out, with clarity and force, some of the excesses and problems that develop in Revivalist theology. Another book by John Nevin was *The Mystical Presence*, in which he attempted to recover something of Calvin's own emphasis on the Lord's Supper as opposed to an American understanding of the Lord's Supper, which seemed, to Nevin, to follow the Memorialism of Zwingli and not the real spiritual, mystical presence of Calvin. John Nevin was an important theologian, but his influence was deluded in the American evangelical church and certainly in the Calvinist church by distaste for the doctrine of the divine decrees. Nevin's own pilgrimage became closer and closer to the Roman Catholic Church in the latter part of his life.

Philip Schaff became the preeminent church historian in the nineteenth century and in some ways the father of American church history. His eight volumes, called *History of the Christian Church*, are still valuable and important for anyone studying church history. He edited the creeds of Christendom and the Nicene and post-Nicene fathers. In saying those few words about Schaff, you can immediately see how

important he is for us even today as we attempt to study the history of the church. Schaff's own historical theory, his understanding of church history, was marked by a theory of development. One writer has called it a "somewhat romantic, progressing, dialectical development." Schaff felt that church history was constantly correcting itself as different movements would arise to correct the mistakes or the over- or under-emphases of other movements. Eventually, there would be a kind of evangelical Catholicism that would bring all the churches together in the highest expression of Christian truth. Schaff promoted that, and that led him to advocate a revision of the Westminster Confession of Faith in order to accommodate other Christian traditions more clearly in changing something of the Calvinist tradition. He supported that revision of Westminster against the Princeton theologians and against his own colleague, William Shedd.

So, we had the New England theology and the Mercersburg Theology. I think the most significant of the schools of Reformed, Calvinist theological thought in America in the nineteenth century was the Princeton School and the Princeton theology. Princeton's history can be traced back to the Log College in Neshaminy, Pennsylvania, the school of the First Great Awakening conducted by William Tennent, Sr. So many of the great preachers of the First Great Awakening were trained there. Out of that Log College came the College of New Jersey, founded in 1746. Eventually, the seminary was founded in 1812 with its motto, "Piety of the heart and solid learning." The first faculty of the seminary was Archibald Alexander, who came from a church in Philadelphia. Alexander was originally from Virginia. He had been president of Hampden-Sydney College and a pastor in Virginia. Then he was a pastor in Philadelphia before becoming the first professor at Princeton Seminary. The second year, he was joined by Samuel Miller, who had been serving as pastor of a Presbyterian church in New York City. Several years later, in 1820, these two were joined by one of the early Princeton Seminary graduates, Charles Hodge. Hodge, Alexander, and Miller made up the first faculty.

Let me summarize the Princeton theology in five points. First, it was a place of Reformed theology. The textbook at Princeton was Francis Turretin's *Institutes*, which was still in Latin. The students read and practically memorized 20 to 40 pages of Turretin in Latin in order to recite those theological ideas to their teacher, Charles Hodge. Eventually, the Princeton students were rescued from the Latin of Turretin by Hodge's own three-volume *Systematic Theology* in English. However, there was still quite a bit of Latin and other languages in the footnotes and in various references that Hodge makes in the books. Much of what Hodge does in his *Systematic Theology* is bring up-to-date the ideas and teachings of Francis Turretin. Hodge is famous for having said more than once that "a new idea never originated at Princeton." Some people like to quote that and say, "It is just like we thought. There is nothing new going on there. It is just old-fashioned theology." It is very much what Hodge and the Princetonians wanted to advocate. Hodge may have overstated that there is never a new idea at Princeton, but it was his conscious desire and Princeton's purpose to pass on unaltered and unchanged what it had received from Reformed tradition. I think Princeton largely succeeded in doing that. Historic Christian Reformed orthodoxy in the nineteenth century was not New England or Mercersburg but the Presbyterian Seminary in Princeton, New Jersey.

One of the emphases of Princeton as the century wore on was the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture. In 1881, A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield wrote an article together that was published in a book called *Inspiration*. The Princetonians argued, quite rightly, that inerrancy was not a new idea despite some modern historians and theologians who attempted to say that Princeton invented the doctrine of inerrancy. They believed that they were going back to the Westminster Confession, to the Reformers, to Augustine, and to the Bible itself to set forth the Bible's own view of itself as inspired by God—plenary verbal inspiration, which to them was the inerrancy of Scripture. That has become one of the hallmarks of the Princeton theology of the nineteenth century.

Another emphasis of Princeton (often overlooked but important) is piety in the Christian life. When Andrew HOFFECKER wrote *Piety and the Princeton Theologians* in 1981, it was hard for him to get people to take him seriously at first. Princeton was known as a place of high orthodoxy and Protestant scholasticism. A place of devotional life, love for God, and constant search for a deeper walk with the Lord did not sound like Princeton to the minds of many people until Hoffecker wrote this book and revealed what was true all along—that this was not just a theological seminary where important work was being done on great teachings, doctrines of the Bible, but a place where people were endeavoring to walk with the Lord, love Him, and serve Him. Every seminary student should read B. B. Warfield's articles "The Religious Life of Seminary Students" and "Spiritual Culture in the Theological Seminary." I urge you to read these articles. They are wonderful messages of what it means to be a seminary student and how to preserve and increase our spiritual life in the midst of all of our academic work.

Another emphasis at Princeton was evangelism and missions. Princetonians were by no means opposed to revivals. They were opposed to the type of revivals they saw taking place under Finney for reasons we have already looked at. But Archibald Alexander was often referred to as "The prince of Methodist preachers." He was not a Methodist at all. He was a Calvinist and a Presbyterian, but he was so zealous to preach in revivals that people almost thought he was a Methodist. His son, J. W. Alexander, preached that everyone will be saved who yields to the moving of the Spirit, takes God at His Word, and makes the universal offer his own particular salvation. Henry Ward Beecher, reading those words from J. W. Alexander, claimed that such a statement represented the theology of Taylor and New England and was not the theology of Princeton. But it was the theology of Princeton. J. W. Alexander and others preached this kind of Gospel as they offered salvation to the sinner and urged sinners to receive it. The Princeton Student Society of Inquiry on Missions was one of the most active and important centers of missionary study and missionary zeal in the first half of the nineteenth century. Before missions boards became active in recruiting and training missionaries, it was the student societies at Princeton and other colleges that carried on the work of sustaining and strengthening the missionary movement in nineteenth-century America.

A fifth point about the Princeton theology was an informed interaction with culture. The Princetonians certainly emphasized the importance of the Christian world and life view. The Princeton journals such as *the Biblical Repertory* in 1825 and *The Princeton Theological Review*, which ended in 1929, were the leading voice for Calvinism in America for over 100 years. At Princeton in 1898, Abraham Kuyper, the great Dutch Calvinist and theologian, gave lectures. He was a political leader who was soon to become the prime minister of the Netherlands. If you have been in the chapel at Covenant College, there is a window there that shows Dr. Warfield welcoming Abraham Kuyper. In February 1998, there was an anniversary lecture series at Princeton called "Religion, Pluralism, and Public Life: Abraham Kuyper's Legacy from the Twenty-First Century; Abraham Kuyper's Stone Lectures: the 100th Anniversary, February 25-28, 1998." We will eventually see the papers published that were given at that conference. But it is interesting to think that 100 years after these lectures were given, another set of lectures was given to commemorate the importance of Abraham Kuyper and The Stone Lectures of 1898. We will talk about Abraham Kuyper later when we get to nineteenth-century developments in the church in the Netherlands, but his Princeton Stone Lectures are a part of the history of Princeton. They point to the importance of the Christian worldview, which Kuyper so wonderfully epitomized in his lectures as part of the Princeton Seminary heritage. That is all I am going to say about Princeton. We have to move on to other topics now.

Not only were there these centers of Calvinism in the North—New England declining away from the teaching of Jonathan Edwards, Mercersburg recovering some important emphases in Calvinism but also

struggling with some of the problems reflected in Nevin's own spiritual pilgrimage, and Princeton holding true to the faith and the teaching of the Reformers throughout that whole century—but there were also centers of Presbyterian and Calvinist thought in the South. The centers in the South for Reformed theological thinking were Union Seminary in Virginia and Columbia Seminary in South Carolina. Union Seminary in Virginia began in 1824 at Hampden-Sydney College. It eventually moved to Richmond, but the early part of its history was at Hampden-Sydney. The most famous theologian connected with Union was Robert Lewis Dabney. As late as 1860, Princeton attempted to bring Dabney to its faculty, but he preferred to stay in Virginia partly because he saw the war clouds on the horizon and wanted to be in the South when the Civil War began. Actually, Dabney served as an officer under Stonewall Jackson. After the Civil War he first thought of going to Brazil. He really wanted to get away from the North, and Brazil was a long way away. But he went to Texas instead and there helped found Austin Theological Seminary; he encouraged the growth of the Presbyterian Church in Texas.

Columbia Seminary in South Carolina, founded in 1829, had a number of outstanding theologians including James Henley Thornwell, who lived to be only 50 years old but left his mark on southern Presbyterianism, and John Lafayette Girardeau, who was pastor of the black Presbyterian church in Charleston, South Carolina. After the Civil War, Girardeau went to the seminary in Columbia and taught there the rest of his life. There is not really much difference between Union, Princeton, and Columbia. Columbia, perhaps, is a bit more Calvinistic in the sense of going back to the teaching of the *Institutes*. Princeton got its theology more from Turretin, which of course would be one step removed from Calvin and the *Institutes*. As Princeton Seminary produced a series of important journals of theological thought, so did the Southern Presbyterian Church in the *Southern Presbyterian Review*. One of the interesting things particularly of the Princeton journals, but also of the *Southern Presbyterian Review*, is that these journals included articles of almost everything and not strictly theology alone. They talked about recent inventions in science, recent discoveries and explorations in geography, music, art, literature, culture, theology, Bible, and Bible criticism. To scan through those nineteenth-century journals shows something of the breadth of interest of the Christian world and life view that marked these old Presbyterians. Well, was there no other source and center for Reformed thought in the nineteenth century? There was one other, but it was rapidly losing its Reformed heritage.

I need to say a word about the Baptists before we end this lesson. Despite a persistent strain of Arminianism within Baptist life (it was always there amongst the General Baptists—that means “general atonement Baptists”), until sometime in the nineteenth century or perhaps even the early twentieth century, most of the Baptists adhered to the doctrines of grace as set forth in Pauline, Augustinian, and Reformed theology. Those doctrines were transmitted through the enormously influential Philadelphia Confession, which in large measure is the Westminster Confession of Faith. Baptists inherited from their English forbearers the doctrines of grace as taught in the Westminster Confession. You can see that type of theology from the covenant and articles of faith of the First Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, adopted at the organization of that church on January 1, 1848. It is certainly a Reformed and Calvinistic statement of faith. However, a gradual change came over Baptist life in the nineteenth century as Thomas Nevils put it, “until the majesty of a sovereign God was swallowed up by a partially fallen man.” The doctrines of grace were largely eclipsed among Baptists. As Nevils also expressed it, “This theology vanished like a puff of smoke in a strong wind in nineteenth-century America.”

The loss of Calvinism in the Baptist church was due largely to three things. The first was Campbellism, the Arminian and anti-confessional restoration church movement on the frontier that the Baptists had to struggle with and deal with and were influenced by. The second thing was Landmarkism. There was a landmark movement particularly in the Southern Baptist Church in which you had an exclusive Baptist theology and no fellowship with other Christians. It required immersion even to transfer members from

other Baptist churches. There was no table communion of the Lord's Supper and an idea that Baptists maintain their own pure succession throughout church history, not getting mixed up with the Roman Catholic Church or Protestant churches. That exclusivism tended to isolate Baptists and moved them away from fellowship with other evangelicals and with Calvinists. Some of the landmark Baptists were Calvinists and remain so. Many of them lost their Calvinism during this hyper-Baptist movement within the Southern Baptist Church. The third reason that the doctrines of Calvinism declined among the Baptists was because of a very hyper-Calvinist movement within the Baptist church itself—churches that are called Primitive Baptist or sometimes Hard-Shell Baptist in which there was a virulent anti-missionary attitude and anti-evangelistic attitude, a kind of hyper-Calvinism that says sinners cannot repent and should not be asked to do so. That is not Calvinism, of course, but it became hard for Baptists to separate that sort of teaching from the true Calvinism of Charles Spurgeon, the London Confession, and the Philadelphia Confession. Today it is encouraging to note that there is a kind of revival of Reformed thinking among Southern Baptists and other Baptists. It is very disturbing to some Baptists while other Baptists are rejoicing that these doctrines, this confessional heritage, are being restored again in Baptist thought, which are really a part of Baptist history.

Well, that is a brief overview of the nineteenth century in terms of Calvinism. It was not a great century for Calvinism because it was declining in influence and power in American life and in the American church. But some places were holding firm—Princeton, Columbia, Union, and other individuals and churches throughout America—to carry the doctrine of Reformed faith through the century and into the twentieth century.

“Seeing that we are surrounded with such a great cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us” (Hebrews 12:1).

The question has been asked, “Of the three Presbyterian seminaries talked about, where are they today theologically?” Princeton is a very eclectic place today. The theology there goes from one end of the theological spectrum to the other, but I must say it is more encouraging to hear about Princeton now than when I was there 10 years ago. For one thing, the president of Princeton, Dr. Gillespie, can be described as a moderate. I was really amazed when he ordered 45 sets of my two-volume history to give to all the trustees of Princeton Seminary. When I wrote that history I thought that I would be *persona non grata* forever on the Princeton campus. But among some of the people there, the books were well received. Perhaps God will use that influence in some small way to bring renewal to Princeton.

The other interesting and exciting thing about Princeton is that Bruce McCormack teaches there. Bruce went to Covenant Seminary for two years. He came from Kansas City as a Nazarene. He thought he would try the Reformed faith for a bit and did battle with Dr. Jones and others for two years. He went back to Kansas City to get his theology straightened out again and became a Calvinist back there at his Nazarene seminary. He went on to Princeton and did his doctoral studies there. He taught at New College in Edinburgh for several years. I visited him there some years ago. Mary McCormack, his wife, is also a graduate of Covenant Seminary. Then Bruce was invited back to Princeton to teach. Recently, David Jones told me that Richard Mao, who is the president of Fuller Seminary, heard from Dr. Gillespie this story, that at the end of last semester Bruce had been teaching a class on theology at Princeton and he said at the end of a class, “Class is over. You can go, but I am going to stay here and pray a bit because I have an idea that for some of you, as we have studied about God, the Bible, the Holy Spirit, and salvation, these things are theoretical and academic.” It is not right to study theology that way. Actually, Bruce is famous as a professor who begins his classes with prayer. At Princeton Seminary, this is not the usual custom. But on this occasion, he invited students who wanted to stay behind to stay and pray with him. Gillespie said half the class stayed and prayed with Bruce for an hour.

Dr. Gillespie said to Dr. Mao, “We are going to have a revival yet at Princeton.” So, with his attitude and people like Bruce McCormack at Princeton, there is hope there. Bruce did his doctoral work on Barth. He is probably a Barthian. He takes, in my mind at least, the best side of Barth. There is a good side of Barth. Perhaps the other side overly influences it, but there is still a lot of conservative, orthodox power there. When I studied at Covenant, Barth was viewed as a real liberal—someone who had practically forsaken the faith. When I went to Princeton, they talked about him there as though he were a fundamentalist. So, I was confused as to what Barth really was. Was he a liberal or a fundamentalist? He really was neither. That is Princeton. Some good things happened. The Charles Hodge Society was founded among the students. Issues of the *The Princeton Theological Review* are beginning to come out again through the influence of the student society.

Union in Richmond has been in a big upheaval lately. I do not think that the current president is sympathetic toward the conservative causes that are being promoted there. I do not know as much about Union, but I am not as hopeful about Union or about Columbia. It is really sad that these two southern seminaries have lost a great deal of their theological orthodox. So, let us pray that Covenant will (not only now but in years to come and forever until the Lord comes back) stand true to His Word and to the teaching of the Word.