

“A Volatile Mix”
I Corinthians 14:26-33, 37-40
“Century Service: 1750-1800” - February 22, 2009

Ben Franklin is conducting experiments with electricity, while also generating a negative current from England with his “Plan of the Union” to unite the colonies under one President general. French collusion with American Indians is on the verge of erupting into a colonial war that will last a number of years. George III will soon become king of England. Remember, too, the Whiskey Rebellion, Forbes’ march to Pittsburgh, and that little foray known as the American Revolution. The second half of the 18th century is packed with a volatile mix of intense ardor and a struggle for a new order.

Order and ardor also battle with each other in New York City’s only Presbyterian congregation in the 1750’s. A heated controversy disturbs the congregation: Is it right for this church to have replaced a traditional hymnbook of metrical psalms by Francis Rous with a book of hymns by Isaac Watts, for use in regular worship?

Some members of the congregation have come to know Watt’s hymns through contact with George Whitefield, the English evangelist. Whitefield is described by historian Martin Marty as “a cross-eyed Englishman who had a genius for discerning the hungers of Americans in the colonies.” An itinerant preacher, Whitefield draws large crowds, a regular Joel Osteen of the 18th century, except Whitfield compares his own birth in England to the birth of Jesus Christ.

The underlying conflict over the use of hymns is, in fact, a kind of “culture war,” as we call them today. Not just New York church members but also Presbyterians in colonial America are engaged in the volatile mix of order versus ardor. On the one hand are those who claim that worship must contain no elements not specified in scripture. The Psalms are scripture, so they qualified for inclusion, metrically sung. On the other side are those who see no problem singing hymns composed by men.

Battle lines are drawn more deeply between those who claim scripture as the only measure for worship and those who are pushing for more emotional elements. Less order; more ardor. The Great Awakening in America is creating distress in the church. Some Presbyterians object to the displays of enthusiasm which at times disrupted right worship. (Can we have an “Amen”?) Eventually this friction is addressed by the larger church with the adoption of the Directory for Worship in the 1780’s. But in the meantime, people choose sides.

The Old School holds firm to a certain sense of decorum in worship. Scripture is the measure for anything used in the worship service. Led by people such as Dr. Samuel Miller of Princeton Seminary, Old School adherents tended to reject prescribed liturgies (too Anglican), holy days, godparents, confirmation, kneeling for the Lord’s Supper, bowing at the name of Jesus, and the sign of the cross at baptism. At the conclusion of worship, the minister is supposed to leave the pulpit and the church as soon as possible,

“gravely, silently, alone,” without conversing with anyone, so as not to create a scene of noise and disorder!

The New School, influenced by the Great Awakening and people such as Whitefield, Asbury, the Methodist movement, and all who hoped to “change hearts” with a highly evangelistic appeal, primarily desire to “win the lost.” Quite out of keeping with Presbyterian tradition, New Side worship is sometimes referred to as “the promiscuous assembly,” often marked by disorder that even the apostle Paul would have recognized as similar to the congregation at Corinth which he advise, “do everything decently and in order.” Charles Finney is a leader in this influential movement in which the unconverted person in the “audience” (no longer a congregation) becomes the target, so to speak. The goal is to effect clear and speedy conversions. This is certainly a major departure from Presbyterian theology.

Old Schoolers believe pastors should be educated in the academies and universities where classical training is the norm, which meant schools in England and Europe. New Schoolers start to establish their own training colleges on this continent, including the Log College of New Jersey, which soon becomes Princeton. Eventually the two factions come to verbal blows over the ordination of pastors, which schools they attend, and whether it is appropriate to question them over their own moment of spiritual awakening. Each side holds firmly its own view!

Meanwhile in 1749, Samuel Thomson has already served the congregation at Meeting House Springs for ten years as an Old School pastor and is moving to serve the church at Conewago, near Gettysburg. He leaves under a cloud, denounced by members of his congregation who have caught the ardor of the New Side. They maintain that Thomson shows no evidence of fitness for their calling. Additionally they may also be upset over his second marriage following the death of Janet, his first wife.

After Thomson’s departure, the people at Meeting House Springs have no installed pastor for nearly ten years. Since there are no extant records, we do not know how they were served. But by this time, other concerns have overtaken the countryside as the French and Indian War spreads. Many members, seeking safety, move into Carlisle, recently formed in the new Cumberland County. Fort Louthier offers at least some security.

Eventually the pastor for the Old Side Presbyterians is called. Rev. John Steel of Ireland arrives in the frontier town where another pastor, Rev. George Duffield already has a congregation of Presbyterians. Duffield, born in Pequea and educated at upstart Princeton, is widely known as a remarkable New School preacher. The relationship between Steel and Duffield is marked with discord from the very beginning.

According to Conway Wing’s book, Duffield charges Steel with haste in procuring his call to Carlisle and Silver Spring. When he learns Steel’s congregation is making plans to build a place of worship, Duffield brings a complaint which the Synod settles by urging both pastors to work together to build just one worship house in Carlisle.

The records indicate Duffield's congregation, located across from the present Salvation Army on South Hanover St., is authorized to raise money by a lottery in 1760. Meanwhile John Armstrong, who by now is brother-in-law to Duffield, is writing letters to secure rights for the building in which we now worship. In 1757, one of his letters indicates that stones are already being moved to the site, although building the structure lingers through many years.

Duffield raises questions about the ordination of some of Steel's elders. Duffield believes the elders were not asked the proper constitutional questions required for ordination. Again, in a case brought first to the presbytery and then to the synod, Steel's elders are deemed proper for service.

In 1764, Steel and elders Elder, Bread, Smith and McMurdie are disturbed by presbytery guidelines for the ordination of ministerial candidates. Guidelines seemed to allow candidates to be questioned about their "spiritual regeneration or personal experience." Old School Steel and his elders therefore decline to be active members of the presbytery until they receive advice from the synod. In the end, the congregation becomes part of the old School's Second Presbytery of Philadelphia, until Steel's death.

Meanwhile, on the New Side, Duffield is invited to serve the Big Spring church along with the Carlisle congregation. Big Spring wants him to serve half time. Carlisle presses for one third time for Big Spring or nothing at all. Eventually the presbytery agrees to the 1/3 and 2/3 time. When Duffield is called to serve Second Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia in 1763, the local congregations object and Presbytery agrees. Duffield stays put, although he and Rev. Beatty go on a mission to the Indians in 1766, stopping at the present location of Center Church in Perry County before separating, uniting again in Muskingum OH before returning to Carlisle. Then in 1769, when Big Spring cannot pay Duffield, he agrees to serve the new Monaghan church in Dillsburg. By 1772, Duffield accepts a call to Third and Pine PC in Philadelphia. Soon after his departure, the church building in Carlisle burns.

By now the renowned architect Robert Smith has been secured to plan the new Meeting House on the Square. Funded by subscriptions, the list of those who give funds for the new building includes people from many places of leadership, including one man who is a Tory loyalist. With a deed secured from the Penn brothers in 1766, eventually this structure is raised. Within its walls in those early years, a meeting of freeholders declares support of the Boston uprising against tea taxes and the King of England who had signed a charter for this very church.

During the Revolutionary War years, worship is not ordinary in terms of regularity. Many men of the congregation are serving in the continental army, including Captain John Steel, while others like James Wilson are doing battle for order and ardor in the writing of the Declaration of Independence.

When John Steel dies in 1779, the Donegal Presbytery urges the two congregations - Old and New Schools alike - to become one in the new meeting house. In 1784 and 85, Rev. Robert Davison of Elkton MD and professor at the University of Pennsylvania, accepts a call to serve Presbyterians in Carlisle. At the same time he serves as professor at newly founded Dickinson College. In addition, he also serves temporarily as the college President. In 1785 Dr. Charles Nisbet becomes the President of the college and shares preaching responsibilities in this congregation.

In 1786, the joining of two congregations is marked with renovations to this room. The gallery is enlarged and seats are assigned, making room for a congregation in which members carry divergent opinions on the role of intellect and emotion, ordination requirements for officers and pastors, and corporate histories. Other heat is added in 1790 with the installation of interior stoves. When the Whiskey Rebellion occurs, President George Washington worships here in October, 1794. Whether or not he notices the newly installed chandelier and the new appointments for the pulpit purchased by “the ladies” that same year, Washington is here at a new beginning for the congregation. In the newly reformed Presbyterian Church in the United States, the General Assembly meets in this place in both 1792 and 1795. Rev. Davidson serves as its moderator in 1796.

Although the effects of the Great Awakening and battles between order and ardor will continue in the country and in this congregation in coming years, for the time being, under Davidson’s leadership, apparently everything is being done “decently and in order,” even as the congregation continues to sing from Rouse’s version of the metrical Psalms!

RESOURCES:

Ahlstrom, Sydney E., *A Religious History of the American People*
Marty, Martin E., *Pilgrims in Their Own Land*
Melton, Julius, *Presbyterian Worship in America: Changing Patterns Since 1787*
Olmsted, Clifton E., *Religion in America, Past and Present*
Weis, Frederick Lewis, *The Colonial Clergy of the Middle Colonies, 1628-1776*
Wing, Conway P., *A History of the First Presbyterian Church of Carlisle, PA.*

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