

Princeton Seminary

Vol. 1

Faith and Learning 1812-1868

by

David Calhoun

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A Review

by

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There are many positive features of David Calhoun's new history of Princeton Seminary. Volume 1 aptly carries the subtitle "Faith and Learning," because the book illustrates how the church is edified when served by a ministry which is both pious and educated. Calhoun traces the development of ministerial training among American Presbyterians. He covers the early days of John Witherspoon (at Princeton College in the 1700's) through the first fifty years of Princeton seminary in the 1800's. The symbiotic relationship between Princeton College and Princeton Seminary is illustrated throughout the book, but the main focus is on the seminary's role in 19th-century American Presbyterianism.

Calhoun begins his narrative with the early factors within American Presbyterianism which resulted in the founding of Princeton Seminary in 1812. The Great Awakening, the secularization of American colleges, the expansion along the country's western frontiers, and the vast prospects for foreign missions: these factors convinced Presbyterians of the need for a school dedicated to training ministers. The seminary's first professor, Archibald Alexander, emerges as the central figure in the story; and the author portrays Alexander as the very personification of a pious and educated ministry. The second professor at the school, Samuel Miller, underscored the emphasis on faith and learning; Miller frequently exhorted the church to promote a ministry which was both pious and well-educated.

One delightful feature of the book is the inclusion of numerous vignettes telling about some of the lesser-known figures connected with the seminary. For example,

the reader is told about Ashbel Green's efforts in the formation of the seminary, as well as his influential station within the American Presbyterian church; it was said of Dr. Green that "his influence was such that he could make a motion in the General Assembly and without giving a single argument take his seat and his motion would be carried."¹ There are also many interesting anecdotes about Joseph Addison Alexander (the third son of Archibald), who was a child prodigy; Addison mastered Greek, Latin, and Hebrew by age 10, and subsequently became proficient in Arabic, Persian, Syriac, Chaldean, French, Italian, Spanish, German, and Aramaic.

Despite the laudable qualities of Calhoun's history of Princeton Seminary, there are several aspects of the volume which are less satisfactory. We will give attention to some of these items, since they will not be apparent to most readers, and because many significant publications linked to the school in its early days are largely inaccessible to modern readers.

The book gives a deficient account of the eldership debates which took place within the Presbyterian Church in the mid-1800's. At one point, Calhoun states, "The debate continued with Thomas Smyth, Presbyterian minister in Charleston, South Carolina, supporting the Miller-Hodge position, and Robert Louis Dabney of Virginia upholding the Thornwell-Breckinridge view."² This analytical summary is overly simplistic, and leaves serious misimpressions. It is true that Miller and Hodge were on the same side of the issue of whether ruling elders should join in laying hands on ministers during ministerial ordinations. But to speak of the "Miller-Hodge position" of the eldership, as the author does, conveys the notion that Hodge maintained Miller's views on the eldership in the ensuing eldership debates; and, further, it implies that R. J. Breckinridge, J. H. Thornwell, and R.L. Dabney abandoned Miller's teachings on the eldership.

In truth, the issue is not that simple. Miller's writings on the eldership contain some inner tensions which Professor Miller never resolved in his lifetime (and which were not really resolved by the subsequent debates either). After Miller died, all parties in the eldership debates tended to seize upon those portions of the professor's writings which favoured their cause. Miller had sought to raise the dignity and usefulness of the eldership in the Presbyterian church. He stressed the divine warrant and qualifications for the office by citing numerous passages in the Bible, including those in Paul's epistles to Timothy and Titus. Yet, on the basis of 1 Tim. 5:17, Miller presented a distinction between ruling and teaching elders. Miller saw this distinction largely in terms of different functions, while maintaining the parity of both kinds of elders in the church courts.

In taking this approach to the eldership, Miller maintained a pastoral perspective. He elevated the elders of the church, because he saw that their service within the church was an untapped resource much needed in his day. The work of the min-

1. Calhoun, p. 281.

2. Calhoun, p. 301.

ister is inevitably more burdensome, if he does not have other elders assisting him with pastoral visitation and oversight of the congregation.

A tension created by Miller's paradigm became apparent in the later eldership debates. Thomas Smyth and Charles Hodge feared a denigration of the ministry, if ruling elders were on a parity with preachers. Hodge and Smyth taught that the term presbyter, as used in the New Testament, was restricted in meaning to include only ministers; they contended that, strictly speaking, the word presbyter did not refer to ruling elders at all ³.

In lengthy articles on the eldership (published by Charles Hodge in the *Biblical Repertory* and *Princeton Review*), Thomas Smyth cited Miller's earlier writings against episcopacy; there Miller employed various scriptures about presbyters to argue a parity of the ministry, against Anglican claims of prelacy.⁴ On the other side of the debate, Breckinridge, Thornwell and Dabney referenced Miller's writings, in places where Miller made extensive use of N.T. passages dealing with presbyters to establish the warrant and duties for ruling elders.⁵ The problem with the Hodge-Smyth position is patently obvious. If N.T. references to presbyters do not refer to ruling elders at all, both the warrant and the qualifications for ruling elders must be drawn from some other place.⁶ That leaves scant information about the office of the elder - a fact made all the more embarrassing in a denomination which takes its name from the biblical term under dispute! The problem anticipated by Hodge and Smyth is that, if ruling elders are on a parity with ministers, then the doctrine has a levelling effect, in which the distinctive functions of the ministry are lost, and ruling elders are entitled to preach and administer the sacraments. (Part of the difficulty here seems to result from a concept of ecclesiastical office being considered as an entitlement to rights and privileges, rather than as a calling to specific tasks.)

3. On this point, Hodge and Smyth unquestionably strayed from Miller's paradigm. Miller consistently applied N.T. passages about presbyters to ruling elders as well as ministers. Even when he spoke in opposition to ruling elders laying hands in the ordination of ministers, Miller still considered the ruling elder to be a presbyter. In 1843 (during the first phase of the eldership debates), Miller delivered a sermon in Philadelphia, which was subsequently published under the title of *"The Warrant, Nature, and Duties of the Office of the Ruling Elder in the Presbyterian Church"* (Philadelphia: William S. Martien, 1844). In this discourse, based upon I Tim. 5:V, Miller routinely speaks of ruling elders as presbyters: that point was not yet a question in the public debates. In an appendix to the published sermon, Miller also explains his view of the *jus divinum*, or the divine right of church government. In principle, on this point, he is much closer to Thornwell than to Hodge.

4. Hodge published Smyth's articles serially in three issues of the quarterly *"Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review"* in 1860. For the April issue, Hodge also wrote an article on "Presbyterianism."

5. Thornwell's writings on church polity are found in volume 4 of his *Collected Writings*. Dabney's most important article on the subject is found in volume 2 of his *Discussions*, "Theories of the Eldership," pp. 119-57.

6. The reviewer is constrained to add that he sees this implication of the Hodge-Smyth position to be the most potentially damaging in our own day. If the qualifications found in I Tim. 3 and Titus 1 belong only to ministers, then the standards of piety and doctrine for ruling elders will inevitably be lowered to accommodate the lax standards of morals and knowledge prevalent in our culture. This is practically the case in many Presbyterian churches already; but an official sanction for lower standards in the eldership would justify such laxity.

To be sure: these tensions were never resolved in Miller's writings. So both sides could legitimately quote Miller to bolster support for certain features of their argument. Yet, in the end, Breckinridge, Thornwell, and Dabney were more true to Miller's pastoral concerns respecting the eldership. It was the pastoral angle of the argument which seems to have been lost upon Hodge - which is not surprising, when we consider that he spent his entire career within the academic confines of the seminary, and lacked the broad pastoral experience of all the other parties in the debate.

The subsequent debate on church government (regarding church boards) was really about underlying propositions concerning the discretionary power of the church. Once again, Calhoun's summary is unsatisfactory; in his account of the debate at the General Assembly of 1860, there is a description of Thornwell's position given in quotation marks. What may not be clear to the reader is that this statement does not contain the words of Thornwell. The description is actually Hodge's characterization (which is really more of a caricature) of Thornwell's position: comments which Hodge published in the *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review*.⁷ Since Hodge argued the other side of the debate at the Assembly, it is inappropriate to take this summary as an adequate statement of Thornwell's position. In the debate itself, Thornwell voiced his oft-repeated view of the divine warrant for church government (*Jus divinum*): "God gave us our church-government, as truly as He gave us our doctrines; and ... we have no more right to add to the church-government, which is divine, than to add to the doctrine, which is divine."⁸ Undergirding Thornwell's argument, then, is the belief that God has established both the officers and courts of the church; and these are sufficient, by his grace, to carry out the work of the great commission. A board is not only unnecessary; but it functions as a substitutionary church-court, usurping the role of the legitimate agencies which Christ has ordained. (Or, to frame the issue in an interrogatory form: Are church courts authorized to sub-contract their pastoral and judicial functions to other institutions?)

For Presbyterians to rely upon the agency of a board is to deprecate the distinctive importance of Presbyterian polity, "throwing away our birthright, and putting on the rags and tatters of Independency!"⁹ Thornwell employed many other points, which readers can trace within his writings on the subject.

Hodge responded with a denial "that a certain form of church government and order, in all its details and with all its appliances for the evangelical work, is revealed in the word."¹⁰ Such a statement is somewhat confusing, since Thornwell never advocated that church government was divinely-mandated in exhaustive

7. Calhoun, page 384. The quotation by Charles Hodge is found in "Presbyterianism" in the *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review*, July 1860, p. 546. See note 6 below.

8. "Debate Touching Church Boards," in *Thornwell*, *Collected Writings*, vol. 4, p. 218.

9. *Thornwell: Op Cit.* p. 221.

10. Recorded in *Thornwell: Op Cit.* p. 227; cf. note 3 above. Hodge continued his article in the BRPR with a denunciation against the view that "everything relating to the government and action of the church

detail. Rather, Thornwell contended that certain details were given by divine warrant, especially in respect to officers and church courts. Thornwell's argument was based upon his belief that church boards violated the scriptural pattern of government, in respect to those basic details which *were* divinely ordained.

In other words, the debate hinged upon a consideration of sola scriptura: the sufficiency of scripture in relation to church government. The argument turns on an essential question of the limits of church power; it is the regulative principle of church government. Readers who are interested in the complete course of debate are encouraged to consult the published records in Thornwell's Writings; the full arguments of both parties are given there.

One fact which is not recorded by Calhoun (and which is not found in the published form of the debate either), is very important. At the Assembly's debate, as Hodge "looked over the assembly, he saw perhaps more than half the ministry of this great body who once sat at his feet."¹¹ It takes little imagination to realize that Thornwell was operating at a decided disadvantage, in seeking to sway an audience, in which the majority looked upon Hodge with special respect as their former instructor. We may easily see how Thornwell could lose the vote, even if he possessed the superior arguments. Notably, in an earlier Assembly in 1845, with Hodge absent and Thornwell present, the Assembly voted 173 to 8 (with Thornwell) against the validity of Romish baptisms. Hodge considered the assembly's action a blunder; and he wrote critically of the decision, stating that Rome was still part of the visible church. In Calhoun's narrative of these events, he says "Hodge courageously resisted the nativistic spirit of the time." The author seems pleased that the assembly later rescinded its position against Romish baptisms, and cites the turnaround as a pointed example of the growing "power of Hodge's opinion" within the American Presbyterian church."¹²

These examples raise an interesting issue about the centralized seminary training of ministers: the danger of producing a kind of de facto prelacy which undermines the very nature of presbyterian church polity. When a majority of ministers are trained under the direction of a select few, the instructors have the potential to sway the direction of the church in an inordinate manner. If the ecclesiastical elite are generally orthodox men - such as Miller and Alexander - the damage may be less pronounced. But if the seminary elite go astray, the effects can be especially damaging. In fact, Calhoun himself acknowledges a related problem in his history of Princeton. After the passing of the seminary's founding professors, the school lost its pastoral depth. Both Alexander and Miller had served in lengthy pastorates prior to assuming their responsibilities at Princeton. Miller died in 1849; Alexander followed soon after in 1851. Now, with Hodge at the helm, the remaining seminary

[is] laid down in detail in the Word of God, so that it is unlawful to employ any organs or agencies not therein enjoined" (p. 548). Again, this is clearly a distorted representation of Thornwell's position.

11. Cited from "The Presbyterian" by A. A. Hodge, in the Life of Charles Hodge, p. 447.

12. Calhoun, pp. 304-05.

instructors were woefully short on pastoral experience. The seminary began to receive criticisms for its failure to prepare men to be good preachers and pastors.¹³ This sad development should not be used as a pretext for modern schemes of ministerial training which neglect solid biblical knowledge in order to emphasize religious psychology. But it does serve as a warning that ministerial training can become misdirected if it divorces scholastic achievements from service to the local church. A theological seminary should be exercising students to be ministers of the gospel; otherwise, the school becomes an educational institution which functions merely to dispense academic degrees.

Another significant observation, which may be culled from Calhoun's history, is the strong current of political and ecclesiastical pluralism within American Presbyterianism. The leaven of toleration was already at work from the earliest days of the American Presbyterian church. The author does not develop this theme directly; and when he does mention pertinent evidence of this religious pluralism, he often presents the facts in a positive vein. Readers outside the U.S. need to be aware of the early actions of the American Presbyterian Church which amended the Westminster Standards. By 1789, American Presbyterians had already changed the Westminster Confession to conform to the newly adopted U.S. Constitution. Chapter 23 of the Confession, on the civil magistrate, was totally rewritten, in order to idealize religious pluralism.

Further, the answer to question 109 of the larger catechism was changed to strike the reference to "tolerating a false religion" from among the sins forbidden in the second commandment. This confessional revision occurred prior to Princeton's founding, so that the subsequent history of both American Presbyterianism and the seminary is colored by a pluralistic outlook. Religious toleration became a virtue even within the church, and this set the stage for the development of New School Presbyterianism, and further confessional erosion within the bosom of a church which professed to hold to the legacy of Calvin and the Puritans.

Volume 1 of Calhoun's history closes in the era of the reunion of the Old School and New School Assemblies in the North, after the Civil War.¹⁴ This union could be viewed as the death knell for the doctrinal integrity of the Northern Presbyterian

¹³. Calhoun, pp. 372-74.

¹⁴. The Civil War divided the Old School General Assembly into North and South; and the Southern Presbyterian Church remained a separate communion after the war. Calhoun does a reasonable job of relating events which led to the division. He then relates the dismay of Princeton men in the north, "that our Southern brethren should, with such apparent cordiality and unanimity" have supported the "Rebellion" (p. 392). Perhaps it should be stated that many Southerners did not wish to engage in war, and had no desire to see the institution of slavery continued. Nevertheless, they felt that the authority of the federal government was mediated through the states: that the claims of federal authority came to them only insofar as they were citizens of states which belonged to the federal union. After the states seceded from the union, men remained citizens of the states, to which their first loyalty had always belonged. Thus, to most southerners, submission to state authorities took priority over the claims of the federal authorities.

Church. While Calhoun records Hodge's opposition to the reunion, readers will probably be left without a strong sense of how the reunion undermined the doctrinal foundations of the church. (More information on the impact of the union will be found in Calhoun's volume 2 of the history, to be reviewed, DV in a future issue.)

The important thing to realize is that confessional Presbyterianism, on a national scale, was already dissipating by the mid-18th century. The seeds of destruction for the American Presbyterian Church had already been sown. Had it not been for the godly character of the early Princeton men, the downgrade of the church might have occurred even more rapidly. It is clear that pious souls can be misled, if they lose sight of important doctrinal bearings. Thus, even the decline of American Presbyterianism underscores the importance of having a ministry possessed with both piety and solid doctrinal knowledge.

Princeton Theological Seminary

Founded 1812 under leadership of Dr. Archibald Alexander.

Other famous names who taught on the faculty are:

Dr. Samuel Miller, Dr. Joseph Addison Alexander, Dr. John Breckenridge, Dr. James Waddel Alexander, Dr. William Henlee Green, Dr. Charles Hodge, Dr. Archibald Alexander Hodge, Dr. Caspar Wistar Hodge, Dr. James C. Moffatt, Dr. Francis Lindley Patton, Dr. William M. Paxton, Dr. Charles A. Aitken, Dr. Benjamin B. Warfield, Dr. John Gresham Machen, Dr. Oswald T. Allis, Dr. Robert D. Wilson, and many more. Such names are to be found as authors of many weighty theological tomes.

By the Spring of 1882 some 3,464 students had passed through the seminary, of whom 204 became foreign missionaries.

In 1882 the library contained some 40,000 volumes.

Theologically the Seminary was associated with a conservative Calvinism that came to be known as "Princeton Theology". This theology was promulgated in the Journal "Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review". It was characterised by an initially close, but later relaxed adherence to the revised Westminster Standards. The rise of Evolutionism, Ecumenism, Textual Criticism, and Redaction Criticism began to have a debilitating effect even during the times of the younger Hodges and of Warfield.

By the early 1920's modernism eclipsed the college generally.