

# The “Restless Spirit of Radicalism”: Old School Fears and the Schism of 1837

*Exploring a time when extreme passions led to the rupture of American Presbyterianism.*

by James H. Moorhead

“THE NECESSITY FOR THE SEPARATION OF the parties is urgent,” wrote the Philadelphia-based *Presbyterian* on June 24, 1836. “They do not agree; they cannot agree. We can scarcely conceive of two parties more antagonistic in all the principles of their belief and practice; they receive not the same Gospel; they adopt not the same moral code, and the absence of all mutual affinities must oppose an insuperable barrier to their harmonious union. Truth on one side, error on the other; honesty on one side, artifice on the other....” The two parties were the Old and New School factions within the Presbyterian Church, and soon the author, an ardent Old Schooler, had his wish. The 1837 General Assembly, controlled by an Old School majority, voted to expel four predominantly New School synods. When commissioners from those synods tried to take their seats at the assembly in 1838, they were not recognized and then proceeded to organize their own separate General Assembly. Until 1870 Old and New School Presbyterians existed in separate denominations.<sup>1</sup>

How had it come to pass that Presbyterians framed their disagreements in terms starkly dualistic—truth versus error, honesty versus artifice? Why was it that emotions were so inflamed that many Old Schoolers found desirable a remedy as drastic as excising a significant portion of the church? In

some quarters, the anger was so deep that it continued to smolder even years after the division. As late as 1855, one Old School partisan still contended that “the palpable perversions of religious truth” in the New School would have, if unchecked, “prove[d] the programme to an age of infidelity, and introduce[d] upon the American stage the shocking theological panorama of universal derangement and confusion in the elements of the moral world; as a parallel to which we may point only to the reign of terror and triumph of ungodliness in the *French Revolution*....” To explore the issues and circumstances that aroused such extreme passion, especially within the Old School, and led to the rupture of Presbyterianism is the goal of this essay.<sup>2</sup>

## I

The most ancient source of the 1837 split was the complicated history of cooperation and disagreement that had marked the relationship between Congregationalists and Presbyterians. Congregationalists, largely from England, settled initially in New England after 1630. Presbyterians, some from England but even more from Ireland and Scotland, came in force in the eighteenth century and made their homes chiefly in the middle colonies: New York, New Jersey,

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*Journal of Presbyterian History* 78:1 (Spring 2000)

Pennsylvania, and Delaware. The two groups disagreed over polity, Congregationalists distrusting the Presbyterian subjection of the local church to higher ecclesiastical authority. They also had the memory of religious struggles in England, Scotland, and Ireland that had made them sometime foes as well as allies. Yet differences notwithstanding, these groups often understood themselves as adherents of a common or at least similar tradition. The fate of the Westminster Confession of Faith provides a graphic case in point. Drafted in the 1640s as the work of an English assembly with Scottish advisors, the confession eventually became the official creed of Scottish, Irish, and American Presbyterians. Although never adopted in England, Westminster did serve as a model in important respects for the Savoy Declaration (1658) of English Congregationalism, and its central tenets were reaffirmed by New England Congregationalists at the Reforming Synod of 1680 and of the Saybrook Platform (1708). Congregationalism and Presbyterianism often appeared as variants of a common theological tradition. In fact, the precise boundary between the two was sometimes hard to determine. For example, the first American presbytery, organized in Philadelphia in 1706, had several members from Congregationalist New England; and the uncertain degree of authority the presbytery exercised over its ministers and congregations has led some to suggest that it was possibly more like a Congregationalist ministerial association than a presbytery as we know it today. On the other hand, Connecticut Congregationalists in the Saybrook Platform opted for connectional structures—consociations of churches—that looked to some suspiciously like presbyteries.<sup>3</sup>

Given the similarities between the groups and the sometimes murky boundaries dividing them, it is not surprising that Presbyterians and Congregationalists often maintained cordial and relaxed relationships in the eighteenth century. The career of Jonathan Edwards (1703–58) provides a case in point. A child of Congregationalist Connecticut, he prepared for the ministry at Yale but his

first pastoral duties took him to a Presbyterian church in New York City. Subsequently he returned to labor as a Congregationalist minister in Massachusetts, first in Northampton and later Stockbridge. In 1758, he completed the circle by becoming president of the unofficially Presbyterian College of New Jersey (Princeton) only weeks before his death. Jonathan Dickinson (1688–1747), likewise reared in Connecticut Congregationalism and trained at Yale, made a similar, if more permanent transition, becoming one of the leading ministers in eighteenth-century Presbyterianism. The ease with which individuals could shift between the denominations was paralleled by other forms of cooperation. For example, in 1766 Presbyterians and Connecticut Congregationalists approved mutual consultations that occurred annually until the eve of the Revolution. In the 1790s, both denominations agreed to grant representatives of the other body the privilege not only of speaking but also of voting in their deliberations.<sup>4</sup>

The cooperative spirit reached its most significant embodiment in the Plan of Union (1801). Approved by both the Presbyterian General Assembly and the Congregationalist General Association of Connecticut, the plan outlined principles whereby the denominations could work together in the creation of churches in the “new settlements” produced by the nation’s westward expansion. The plan allowed congregations composed of members of one denomination to call a minister of the other. In cases of dispute between church and pastor, the ministers could appeal to the appropriate bodies of their respective denominations—Congregationalist ministers to their associations, Presbyterians to their presbyteries. If the congregation demurred, then the appeal would be taken to a council drawn in equal numbers from each denomination. The plan also permitted the formation of union churches composed of both Presbyterian and Congregationalist lay people, mandated the creation of standing committees in such congregations, and allowed these “Presbyterian” committees to send voting repre-

sentatives to presbytery. The Plan of Union was not simply a policy decision imposed from the top down. It formalized and ratified cooperative efforts already underway in particular communities, especially in the state of New York. The originators of the plan, while blurring denominational distinctions, did not envision their obliteration. Assuming that parallel Congregational and Presbyterian structures would continue to exist in the same territory, the creators of the plan sought to coordinate efforts so that together the two denominations might more efficiently serve the expanding populations of the nation's western regions.<sup>5</sup>

Yet in some areas, the two churches soon moved beyond cooperation to amalgamation. In 1807, the Synod of Albany in response to an overture from the Middle Association (Congregational) invited that group to become a "constituent part of our body." The synod offered the association's churches the right to continue conducting their internal affairs in accordance with Congregationalist usage while simultaneously enjoying the privilege of representation in the synod. In effect, the synod was proposing to make the association a presbytery under its jurisdiction. Approved by the General Assembly in 1808 and confirmed by the Middle Association, this Plan of Accommodation cleared the way for Congregationalist churches to enter en masse into Presbyterian affiliation while maintaining their own distinctive practices. The pattern set in 1808 was then followed subsequently in other parts of New York and in the Western Reserve of Ohio. How many churches were brought into Presbyterianism in this fashion has been a subject of dispute; but substantial numbers of originally non-Presbyterian congregations, probably in the hundreds, entered the denomination in the first several decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup>

Presbyterians also cooperated with Congregationalists through what today might be called parachurch organizations. In the first quarter of the nineteenth century, Protestants concerned about the promotion of specific causes—for example, foreign and



Rev. Samuel Hopkins

home missionary work or the distribution of Christian literature—created voluntary benevolent societies. Non-denominational in character and outside formal ecclesiastical structure, these organizations were controlled by boards composed of individuals (often lay people) who represented only themselves, not their churches. The voluntary societies thus embodied a task-oriented ecumenism that brought Protestant Christians together in an *ad hoc* fashion. Although these organizations were formed both locally as well as nationally, it was at the national level that they gained great notoriety. A group of an interlocking organizations known collectively as the evangelical united front or the benevolent empire took shape. To name only a few, these institutions included the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (1810), the American Bible Society (1816), and the American Home Missionary Society (1826). Although the benevolent empire had a broader constituency than the Presbyterians and Congregationalists, these two denominations provided the vast majority of the leaders and the workers for the voluntary societies. Through these organizations, then, the co-

operation represented by the Plan of Union was increased and so, too, was the blurring of boundaries between Presbyterianism and Congregationalism.<sup>7</sup>

## II

Yet even as they cooperated with one another, Congregationalists and Presbyterians inched apart theologically. Despite their differences regarding polity, the two groups had originally shared a commitment to the federal theology which had its fullest creedal expression in the Westminster Confession. Called federal because of its stress on covenant (in Latin, *foedus*), this theology envisioned the human condition in terms of two covenants. In the first, God made a covenant of works with Adam who stood as the representative for all humanity. By this covenant, Adam's transgression was imputed or assigned to his posterity who, as a result, were born in a state of sin and were utterly incapable of doing God's will. Salvation came only through the covenant of grace made between God the Father and Christ. By his suffering on the cross, Christ vicariously paid the penalty for sin on behalf of the elect. His righteousness was counted as theirs and only in this fashion could the elect be saved.<sup>8</sup>

By the end of the eighteenth century, some New England Congregationalists modified this theology. A group of ministers considered the disciples of Jonathan Edwards sought to improve and refine the doctrines of their master. Their leading figures included Samuel Hopkins (1721–1803), Joseph Bellamy (1719–90), and Samuel Emmons (1745–1840). Their movement, often called the New Divinity or sometimes Hopkinsonism, was an effort to render the Calvinist or Reformed position more consistent or coherent and thus more defensible in the age of Enlightenment.<sup>9</sup>

Their doctrinal "improvements" proceeded along several lines. The New Divinity theologians felt considerable unease at the notion that Adam's sin was imputed to subsequent generations or that people were condemned antecedent to any acts they

committed. Human beings did not live under a double guilt, Adam's and their own. They were guilty only for sin that they themselves had done. Yet Hopkins and company did not reject the doctrine of original sin. Although a person was culpable only for his or her own crimes against God's law, every man and woman was, in consequence of Adam's fall, born with a corrupted disposition that made sin inevitable.

Just as the New Divinity theologians felt discomfort at the idea that Adam's sin was imputed to subsequent generations, they also were troubled by the notion that Jesus' righteousness paid the debt sinful humanity owed to God. From their perspective, traditional views of the vicarious or substitutionary atonement undercut the sovereignty of God and encouraged moral laxness. If Christ literally paid the penalty for the sinner's transgression, then the sinner's debts were canceled and he or she could legitimately demand salvation from God. Where was grace or the sovereign initiative of God in such a notion? To resolve this problem, the New Divinity theologians suggested a different model of the atonement. They replaced the debtor-creditor image with a governmental metaphor. Sin was not a debt owed God; it was a crime committed against the divine government. Punishment was necessary to uphold God's government, lest the law be flouted and sinners feel free to sin with impunity. The atonement, then, was not Christ's payment of the debt owed by the sinner, for sin was a crime not a debt. Instead the atonement was Christ's bearing of the punishment due for the breaking of the law and expression of God's aversion to sin.

The New Divinity also grappled with the perennial question of free will. In what sense, if any, did fallen humanity have the ability to do the will of God and in what sense did men and women sin of necessity? To answer these questions, Hopkins and others built on a distinction enunciated by their mentor Jonathan Edwards, who distinguished natural and moral necessity. Natural necessity derived from natural or mechanical laws: Someone who falls off a cliff, for example,



Rev. Ezra Stiles Ely

will of necessity plummet downward. That person has no freedom to reverse the law of gravity. But moral necessity was of a different order. Moral necessity referred to the fact that certain actions necessarily and certainly follow from the habits, dispositions, and motives of the heart. Since no external, mechanical law compelled an individual to sin, he or she possessed a natural freedom to avoid sin. However, since the dispositions and habits of the unregenerate were wicked, they would inevitably use that freedom to choose sin. In a word, men and women possessed a natural ability to refrain from sin, but not a moral ability since their souls were warped. Or as William Breitenbach has summarized using another metaphor, “the distinction between natural ability and moral ability allowed the Hopkinsians to shunt divine sovereignty and human freedom past one another on parallel tracks.”<sup>10</sup>

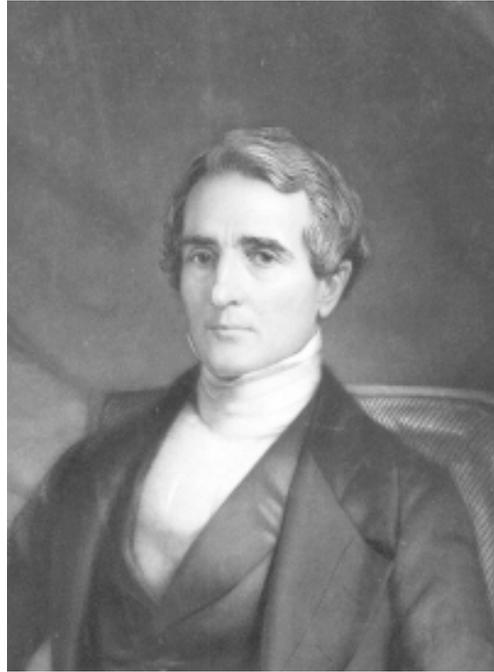
The New Divinity became a formidable power in northwestern Connecticut and western Massachusetts, and, in a time of close cooperation between Congregationalists and Presbyterians, the theology made its appearance among the latter as well. Although its adherents believed the New Divinity to be a preservation and restatement of orthodox Calvinism, opponents both within Congregationalism and Presbyter-

ianism charged otherwise. For example, in 1798, the Presbyterian General Assembly reprimanded Hezekiah Balch, a Presbyterian minister in Tennessee, for espousing the views of Samuel Hopkins. In *A Contrast Between Calvinism and Hopkinsianism* (1811), Ezra Stiles Ely contended that the New Divinity undermined the Reformed understanding of the sinfulness of humanity and the nature of Christ’s redeeming work. Encouraging sinners to think that they might contribute something toward their own redemption, it tended toward the ancient heresy of Pelagianism. In general, however, Presbyterians were not inclined to view the New Divinity in such dire terms. For example, after 1798 Balch appears to have continued to teach the offending views without any further censure from higher judicatories; and Ely’s blast against Hopkinsianism resulted in official ecclesiastical action to soothe rather than inflame the controversy. In 1817, a General Assembly committee chaired by Princeton Seminary’s Samuel Miller reviewed a letter of the Synod of Pennsylvania written by Ely and charging error against the New Divinity. Although the committee commended “the zeal of the Synod” in attempting to promote “strict conformity” to the creedal standards of Presbyterianism, it regretted that ardor “on this subject should be manifested in such a manner as to be offensive to other denominations, and especially to introduce a spirit of jealousy and suspicion against ministers in good standing.”<sup>11</sup>

The committee’s report, alluding to the necessity of maintaining “strict conformity” to Presbyterian creedal standards, pointed to a deeper constitutional issue posed by the intrusion of the New Divinity into Presbyterianism. What did it mean for Presbyterians to be a confessional church? When American Presbyterians early in the eighteenth century had discussed the wisdom of requiring their clergy to subscribe to the Westminster Confession and catechisms, the issue had been hotly debated. Some argued that as a hedge against doctrinal error ministers should be required to subscribe, but

others feared that subscription would exalt mere human interpretations over the Word of God. When the synod (then the highest Presbyterian judicatory in America) in 1729 required ministers to declare their agreement with the Westminster standards, it struck a compromise between those positions. One had to affirm the “essential and necessary articles” of Westminster but remained at liberty to dissent on nonessential points. The synod did not, however, attempt to define which elements were “essential and necessary.” Yet on a subsequent occasion in 1736 with a strong subscriptionist majority in attendance, the synod declared adherence to the Westminster standards to be “without the least variation or alteration.” In other words, those who wished to argue for either a strict or loose constructionist interpretation of adherence to the Westminster Confession could find something to bolster their positions depending upon which historical precedent they chose to emphasize. In the long run, this issue would prove to be a significant one for Presbyterians as they faced rupture in the 1830s.<sup>12</sup>

But during the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the innovations proposed by New Englanders appeared to most Presbyterians to be minor or at least within the range of toleration. By the late 1820s, however, this perception began to change with the emergence of the so-called New Haven Theology and its leading proponent Nathaniel William Taylor. Although scholars still debate the extent to which the theological pedigree of Taylor, professor of didactic theology at Yale, can be traced to Edwards and the New Divinity, he clearly took some of their assertions a step further than they had. For example, Taylor sometimes blurred the New Divinity’s distinction between humanity’s natural and moral ability and thus (in the opinion of critics) appeared to be suggesting that unregenerate humans had a power to effect their own salvation. Soon the theologians at Princeton Seminary, engaging in a sharp exchange in print with the New Haven theologians, pointed to the dangers of Taylorism. The



Rev. Albert Barnes

Princetonians, however, while considering Taylorism to be beyond the pale of acceptability, continued to express a willingness to tolerate, somewhat grudgingly, the New Divinity. To Presbyterians further to the right than Princeton, the situation was more dire. Taylorism symbolized the direction of New England theology as a whole. The controversy compounded their fear that the New Divinity itself was unsound on such questions as total depravity, the imputation of Adam’s sin, Christ’s vicarious atonement, and the nature of regeneration.<sup>13</sup>

In this context, the Reverend Albert Barnes was brought to ecclesiastical trial for a sermon he had preached at his church in Morristown, New Jersey, in February 1829 during a revival. *The Way of Salvation* became an issue when Barnes answered a call to the pastorate of the First Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia in 1830. The city of brotherly love, perhaps poorly named from Barnes’s point of view, was the center of conservative resistance to New England’s theological innovations. Presbyterian leaders such as William Engles and Ashbel Green, believing that only the strictest confessional

subscription to Westminster was acceptable, argued that Barnes had compromised the integrity of the church's standards. He was accused of teaching views that put him at variance with the confession on such matters as original sin, the atonement, and the ability of unregenerate humanity to respond to the call of God. Eventually Barnes' presbytery condemned the teaching of *The Way of Salvation* (though not Barnes personally), but in 1831, the General Assembly reversed that judgment.<sup>14</sup>

The pattern soon repeated itself. In 1835, after publishing a commentary on Romans, Barnes was tried anew and this time suspended from his pulpit by the presbytery for allegedly teaching errors analogous to the ones of which he had been accused several years earlier. In 1836, the General Assembly again reversed the verdict. These episodes are intriguing in view of the argument by historian Earl Pope, the most careful student of the theological dimension of the Presbyterian infighting in the 1830s, that Barnes was no Taylorite and that he went scarcely (if at all) beyond the views advanced by Samuel Hopkins. If Pope is correct, one then sees in Barnes's trials an interesting phenomenon: ideas that had previously been mere irritants within the Presbyterian Church were now generating a major brouhaha. What had changed? Had Taylorism rendered all New England theological innovations subject to guilt by association? And why was it that conservatives were now raising questions about the orthodoxy of other well-known Presbyterian ministers—for example, Lyman Beecher in Ohio, George Duffield in Pennsylvania, and James Wheelock in Indiana? Why by the mid-1830s had the Old School cry against the New School become increasingly shrill and desperate?<sup>15</sup>

### III

"Presbyterian polity might have withstood these debates," Nathan Hatch has observed, "had they been confined to the contrasting theologies....Yet bold and dar-

ing innovations in practice set the Old School proponents on edge. They saw dubious theology wedded to inflammatory practice...." Thus Old School protests against the New School frequently catalogued errors of practice as well as errors of doctrine. For example, at a convention held prior to the General Assembly of 1837, ardent Old Schoolers elaborated in the "Testimony and Memorial" numerous violations of church order and discipline which had been tolerated or encouraged by the New School. Among others, these included the creation of geographically overlapping presbyteries formed on the basis of theological affinity, the failure of presbyteries to examine prospective members on the soundness of their theology, and the representation in the higher judicatories by laymen who had never been ordained as ruling elders. (Here the "Testimony" had in mind the committeemen permitted under the Plans of Union and Accommodation to govern churches and to sit in presbytery, synod, or General Assembly.) Also condemned were "disorderly and unseasonable meetings of the people, in which unauthorized and incompetent persons conducted worship in a manner shocking to public discipline." Among these "shocking" behaviors was the practice of "females often leading in prayer in promiscuous assemblies" that is, in mixed gatherings of men and women. The "Testimony" also expressed anxiety about "the unlimited and irresponsible power, assumed by several associations of men." The benevolent or voluntary societies of the so-called evangelical united front actually took "control of affairs in large portions of the Church, and sometimes in the General Assembly itself, out of the hands of the Presbyteries into those of single individuals or small committees located at a distance."<sup>16</sup>

The Old School complained that proper ecclesiastical order had dissolved, and nowhere were there more dramatic images of the religious world run amok than in upstate New York, the center of New School strength and the place where the Plans of Union and Accommodation had produced the heaviest

Congregational influx into Presbyterianism. In the 1820s, Charles G. Finney, a lawyer (or possibly a law clerk) turned evangelist, brought into the Presbyterian church a revivalism that many found suspect. Finney employed what were commonly called “new measures.” Although the Methodists had actually pioneered in the use of these, Finney brought them into the “Presbygational” churches. The techniques included a pungent, colloquial style in the pulpit, protracted meetings, and the use of the anxious or mourner’s bench where people concerned about the state of their souls were to be seated. When he conducted worship, Finney named sins with uncommon directness; and neither his sermons nor his prayers left much doubt as to the identity of the perpetrators. The evangelist tolerated—some would have said, encouraged—women to step outside their proper domain by speaking in “promiscuous assemblies.” Moreover, Finney’s close association after the 1830s with leaders of national voluntary societies—men such as Arthur and Lewis Tappan—made him an apt symbol of “the unlimited and irresponsible power, assumed by several associations of men.” By the mid-1830s, Finney also condemned slaveholding as sin and insisted that churches would not continue to enjoy revivals of religion unless they spoke forthrightly on the subject. While he claimed certain affinities to Edwards and the New England tradition, Finney was unabashedly and openly moving toward an Arminian view of the freedom of the will. Moreover, he publicly criticized the mode of theological education prevalent in many of the seminaries. These were run by people he styled “ancient men, men of another age.” Had Finney not been safely ensconced in overwhelmingly New School presbyteries at the beginning of his career or had he not later switched his ministerial affiliation to the Congregational denomination shortly after he went off to teach at Oberlin College in Ohio, the Old School would almost assuredly have given him the same treatment it meted out to Barnes and others. Perry Miller probably overstated the case when he asserted that

Finney’s approach “swept some nineteen hundred years of Christian declamation into the wastebasket”; but Finney was unquestionably a rebel against traditional forms of ecclesiastical practice, decorum, and theology.<sup>17</sup>

Finney’s ecclesiastical revolt paralleled larger changes unsettling the order of American society and culture. An economic transformation—a market revolution, gaining force in the several decades after the end of the war with Britain in 1815—profoundly altered human relations. In the Northeast, the growing scarcity of land tore young men and women loose from the ties of blood, place, and prescribed social roles and hurled them westward or into the towns and cities. In the urban areas, artisans who had previously enjoyed some degree of status and independence were subjected to the more impersonal regime of wage earning. Among the growing middle classes, the nature of work tended to separate production from the home and produced a major rethinking of the proper roles of men and women. Among the new religious movements that had sprung out of the revivals, there were a number of women preachers. “By 1830,” Catharine Brekus notes, “female preachers were more visible, more popular, and more aggressive than ever before.” Even Presbyterians who supposedly did not permit such things were not untouched by the popular tide—witness the complaint against Finney’s “promiscuous meetings” or the fact that the Presbytery of Philadelphia censured two churches in 1826 for allowing a female itinerant to occupy the pulpits. Beneath these specific changes was a transformation of consciousness that some historians have called a “democratization of mind”—a new outlook in which ordinary people vaunted their right to take charge of their own lives without the help of traditional authority and without deference to their “betters.” Evidences of that determination appeared in the popular assault against professional elites in medicine and law and in the extension of suffrage to the vast majority of white males. With the electorate vastly widening, politics was increasingly converted into a form of popular



Rev. Charles G. Finney  
Photo courtesy Oberlin College

mobilization and entertainment as the so-called second party system of the United States coalesced in the 1830s. As Robert Wiebe has written, it is little wonder that many observers professed to see in the young nation “only bursts of atomized behavior, a kinetic confusion that was undermining the last pillars of an old order.”<sup>18</sup>

Even mob violence testified to the changing character of American society. Paul Gilje, a recent student of the phenomenon, has noted that pre-nineteenth century riots had often been staged in the name of community unity and values, but that the “new riot” of the 1800s, as he styles it, often self-consciously pitted one group against another. Gone was the sense of a common social interest. Moreover, in the name of egalitarianism, rioters challenged the older hierarchical notions of society whose ideals of deference and paternalism had at least partially constrained those who took to the streets in earlier generations. The change was one of great moment. “Without a common interest,” writes Gilje, “binding the components of society together—without a

recognition that rioter and victim ought to share values—the level of violence in a riot increased.” In an earlier compilation of episodes of mob violence reported in the pages of a leading national paper between 1812 and 1849, historian Leonard Richards discovered a sharp rise in disorder in the 1830s, with the vast majority of incidents in that turbulent decade coming between 1834 and 1836.<sup>19</sup>

The violence studied by Richards was directed chiefly at another sign of the revolt against traditional authority: abolitionism. Exemplified by the formation of the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833, abolitionism changed the tenor of antislavery thought. Prior to the 1830s, there existed in much of the North—and also in some circles in the South—a conviction that slavery was an institution inconsistent with both Christianity and the spirit of the age. It was an anachronism that should and would disappear. The Presbyterian General Assembly expressed this view in 1818 when it branded slavery “a gross violation of the most precious and sacred rights of human nature” and asserted that it was “utterly inconsistent with the law of God.” Yet this form of antislavery thought was exceedingly cautious. It recognized the difficulties of immediate emancipation, honored the property rights of slaveholders, never accused them of being sinners, and looked toward the eventual colonization of blacks in Africa once freedom was gradually and voluntarily attained. The abolitionists assaulted the peculiar institution much more directly. Asserting that slaveholding was a sin demanding repentance, they affirmed that slaves ought instantly to be set free and that, once freed, they should enjoy civil rights. Colonization, the abolitionists charged, was a morally bankrupt substitute for genuine antislavery conviction. With the aid of the penny press that now made possible a relatively cheap mass dissemination of printed material, abolitionists sent out reams of pamphlets and papers touting their message. Speakers fanned out to cities and towns where they preached the gospel of abolition. (The terminology is appropriate, for the meetings often

had the air of a revival; and, in fact, support for abolitionism was frequently linked to the Finneyite style of evangelicalism.) Abolitionists also organized campaigns to inundate the U. S. Congress with antislavery petitions.<sup>20</sup>

The level of fear and hostility directed against the abolitionists is difficult to overestimate. In some places in the South, postmasters ransacked the mails in search of abolition literature; and this illegal tampering enjoyed the full support of the Jackson administration. The petition campaign provoked the House of Representatives to adopt a gag rule preventing the reading of antislavery petitions, and behind that prohibition lay the outrage expressed in South Carolinian Congressman James Henry Hammond's warning that "abolitionists, ignorant, infatuated, barbarians as they are" should "if chance should throw any of them into our hands...expect a felon's death." When abolitionists ventured into countless northern communities, their fate was often only marginally better as they were hounded from lecture halls by mobs often instigated and led by substantial citizens.

As Leonard Richards has demonstrated, these "gentlemen of property and standing" had complex fears. While they were at one level responding to what they perceived as a revolt against proper order, they were at another level fearful of too much order or of a new order of the wrong kind. Abolitionists might be seen as anarchists who allowed democracy to run wild; but as they came out from their headquarters in major cities or as they used the penny press to inundate the land with their propaganda published in those same metropolitan centers, abolitionists might also appear to be the perpetrators of a centralized despotism.

Anti-abolitionists, Richards observes, "dreaded the prospect of becoming indistinguishable 'instruments' in a centrally organized and centrally directed mass society." Abolition—and the violence unleashed against it—testified in a most graphic way to Americans' fear that the old landmarks of order had fallen.<sup>21</sup>



Rev. George Junkin

It is against this backdrop of pervasive confusion and fear that the Presbyterian schism of 1837 must be set. Since abolitionism was arguably the most visible symptom of this ferment, historians have sometimes asked whether the controversy over slavery was the "real" issue dividing the Presbyterian Church in 1837. Framed in this fashion, the question has received a negative answer from most scholars who have studied the question closely. They have shown convincingly that the theological issues dividing the Old and New Schools antedated the explosive debate over slavery in the mid-1830s. Moreover, southern Presbyterians, while probably having from the beginning a greater theological affinity to the Old School, were not deeply engaged in the theological controversy in its early stages. Only as the rupture neared did they in overwhelming numbers cast their lot with the Old School. That decision may have been influenced, historians have acknowledged, by the fact that the majority of Presbyterian abolitionists, with only a few notable exceptions, were within the New School. The consensus view of recent historians has thus come down to this: Slavery did not cause the

schism, but the southern Presbyterian turn to the Old School guaranteed that when division came the Old School had a majority in the Assembly and could divide the church on its own terms. The slavery question, in this view, affected the terrain on which the theological issues were fought out but did not create the issues themselves.<sup>22</sup>

Yet it is probably misleading to pose the question in a manner that draws a sharp distinction between concern for proper doctrine and concern with social issues such as slavery. These were not, in the experience of men and women in the 1830s, entirely separate matters but rather found linkage in a common fear. That fear was one rooted in the entire range of intellectual, religious, cultural, social, and political changes that America was experiencing in the 1830s. It was an anxiety that legitimate authority was under assault and collapsing.

Although a definitive argument for this thesis would require a monograph based on extensive archival work, even a cursory reading of the addresses and writings of Old School leaders in the mid to late 1830s provides considerable supporting evidence. At the 1836 General Assembly, for example, George Junkin, president of Lafayette College and the chief accuser of Barnes in the second trial, pointed to these anxieties when he summed up his plea for the Assembly to sustain the conviction. To do so, however, the commissioners would have to stand against “*the spirit of the age*.” He went on to explain that “a spirit of *free inquiry*...which constitutes the glory of the age, is also in imminent danger of becoming its disgrace or ruin. We think, or seem to think, we cannot give evidence of independent thought, unless we treat with scorn the thoughts and opinions of our fathers. All past ages were bound in mental manacles....” This attitude, Junkin asserted, “is becoming alarmingly violent” and starting to assume some “of the features it displayed thirty years ago in France.” He saw evidence of that transformation in “the tendency to the anarchy of popular government by mobs.” In his last lines, Junkin became even more perfervid:

Over our entire country there prevails a powerful epidemic, attended often with a spasmodic excitability—a kind of moral cholera, that seems to disregard the persons of men and seize the temperate as well as the intemperate. The state and the church are agitated by it. What is a mob, but an appeal to the fountains of power in the people, *immediately*, and irrespectively of the legitimate organs of action? And do we not see the same things attempted in our church? And in reference to this very case too? What is the publication of a *Defense* [that is, Barnes’s defense] before a word of argument is published on the other side, but an appeal to the *people*—to *popular feeling*? What mean these public congregational meetings [by groups favorable to Barnes], to condemn the legitimate actions of the legitimate organs of your church? Is not this the mob spirit?<sup>23</sup>

Junkin’s address made a number of significant rhetorical linkages. The “spirit of free inquiry” was running amok. Revolting against the tradition of the fathers, it tried to mobilize the popular will directly without regard to the intermediary structures that are necessary to both its proper expression and containment. Having gone beyond proper boundaries in both church and state, Americans were falling into anarchy, into mob rule reminiscent of the French Revolution. The nation was in a state of dire illness—a “moral cholera,” Junkin called it—and that was a powerful metaphor indeed for a people who had in recent years witnessed a serious epidemic of the disease. All in all, Junkin’s images suggested a fear that church and society alike were disintegrating.

Robert J. Breckinridge, another leader of the Old School party, addressed the issue of authority at the 1837 General Assembly. In a savage attack on the evangelical united front, he warned of the threat of centralized power by singling out Dr. Absalom Peters, a New School leader who also happened to be the chief executive of the American Home Missionary Society. Noting that the organization controlled the salaries of a number of clergy, Breckinridge warned: “If...Dr. Absalom Peters...was desirous of revolutionizing this country, I know of no man but General Jackson who possesses more facilities to do it than he.” This extravagant comparison—the power of a missionary society’s

leader likened to that of recently retired ex-president Andrew Jackson—prompted Breckinridge to reflect on the relationship of liberty to despotism.

The principle of democracy, if run to extremes, becomes the most terrible of all despotisms, the despotism of a mob. Some central body or individual must wield the power. In the terrible scenes of the French revolution, we have seen the wild and indomitable power of the communes of Paris wielded in turn by a succession of monsters.... [F]rom the very nature of a large and diffused organization, like that which belongs to these societies, the whole effective control must reside in some central committee, consisting of a small number of individuals. In the present case, that control rests in a single hand; and the farther the organization spreads, the wider and more unwieldy it grows, just so much the more certain is the personal control of this reverend doctor of divinity.

Here again were linkages similar to those made by Junkin. An excess of liberty leads to the mob which in turn becomes the prey of the despot. Without adequate intermediary structures—that is, in the presence of “large and diffused organization”—the danger of tyranny becomes overwhelming. Interestingly, the fear animating Breckinridge was analogous to the terror that Leonard Richards has found among the anti-abolition mobs—the fear of losing autonomy “in a centrally organized and centrally directed mass society.”<sup>24</sup>

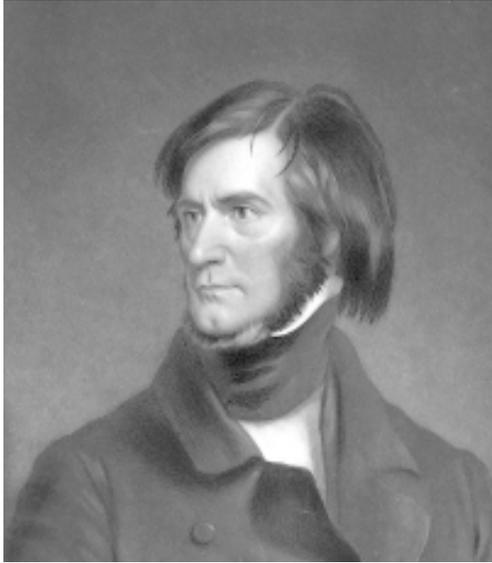
Yet Breckinridge believed that Presbyterianism had the remedy for this dilemma. At the heart of the denomination’s polity lay a structured freedom, “principles of responsibility and representation,” which safeguarded both liberty and order. At this point in his address, Breckinridge was moved to reflect on the Long Parliament which had ordered the writing of the Westminster Confession in which Breckinridge rejoiced as “a great bulwark...of religious freedom.” He described a visit to London where he had stood near the site of another of the Long Parliament’s acts: the beheading of Charles I.

There, too, I sought and found a copy of the warrant for the execution of that base tyrant; and I hung it in my study by the side of our own immortal Declaration of Independence. When I look at it, I rejoice that I am an Anglo Saxon [sic],

and I am ready and willing to take my full share in all the blame which posterity shall ever heap on the memory of the Long Parliament. I thank that body for their efforts in behalf of liberty, civil as well as religious; and especially for the Westminster Confession of Faith. But we have seen, in modern times, a system growing up professedly under that Confession, which has in the end become directly opposed to it. The system I speak of was broached by Edwards and Bellamy; but in the hands of their successors, it has degenerated into a system of radical heresy, the very heresy which you are testifying against.

In this passage, Breckinridge presented heresy as an affront because it undermined a confessional document that had served as a bulwark of ordered liberty—a document that, in his telling, took on an almost tribal quality as an expression of Anglo-Saxon identity. To make these observations is *not* to suggest that Breckinridge’s objections to New School theology were insincere or irrelevant. But clearly his concerns were also more than theological in a technical or narrow sense. His concerns resonated with issues and anxieties about order widespread in the American culture in the 1830s.<sup>25</sup>

In this setting, compromise became increasingly difficult. Those such as the Princeton Seminary faculty who, despite theological affinities for the Old School, had heretofore sought to hold the church together found that moderation was no longer a virtue in great demand. The center was disappearing, and the space between the contending parties was becoming a no man’s land. At the General Assembly of 1837, the Old School finally secured a firm majority. After efforts to negotiate a division with the New School failed, the Old School majority decided to dictate the terms of the division. It did so by abrogating the Plan of Union and by expelling four synods that had been organized under its provisions. In a letter circulated to all Presbyterian congregations, the Assembly explained why it had taken drastic action. The letter emphasized the New School’s alleged denials of orthodoxy—its rejection of “of our covenant relation to Adam,” of total depravity, of humanity’s utter inability to contribute to its own salvation, and of the “imputed righteousness of



Rev. Robert J. Breckinridge

the Redeemer” as the sole ground of redemption and regeneration. The letter charged that New Schoolers had claimed to adopt the Westminster Confession “for substance” while eviscerating its specific content. The letter also enumerated the irregularities encouraged under the Plan of Union and the abuses perpetrated by the voluntary societies.<sup>26</sup>

Near the end of the letter, the Assembly *explicitly* situated its action in reference to a larger predicament. The passage deserves to be quoted in its entirety:

One of the most formidable evils of the present crisis is the wide spread and ever restless spirit of *radicalism*, manifest both in the church and in the state. Its leading principle every where seems to be to level all order to the dust. Mighty only in the power to destroy, it had driven its deep agitations through the bosom of our beloved church. Amidst the multiplied and revolting forms in which it has appeared, it is always animated by one principle. It is ever the same levelling revolutionary spirit and tends to the same ruinous results. It has, in succession driven to extreme fanaticism the great cause of revivals of religion, of temperance, and of the rights of man. It has aimed to transmute our pure faith into destructive heresy, our scriptural order into confusion and misrule.

Here again one discerns deep anxiety about a pervasive crisis of authority. What contemporary historians have called democrati-

zation was for the Presbyterian Old Schoolers living through it a terrifying “spirit of radicalism” threatening to “level all order to the dust.” For them “pure faith [turned] into destructive heresy” was undoubtedly the most disastrous result of that spirit; but by their own words the “formidable” evil had infected far more than doctrine and was achieving “ruinous results” in both church and society.<sup>27</sup>

To restore the order that had been leveled in the dust, the Old School sought to claim a smaller domain but one with more secure boundaries. Because the expansive ecumenism of the Plan of Union and of the evangelical united front had led to irregularities of doctrine and order, Old School Presbyterians abolished the Plan and vowed to assume as a church the activities which the voluntary societies had done on an interdenominational basis. They sought to withdraw from the divisive issue of slavery by remaining silent on the subject in ensuing years. The Old School Presbyterian response to upheavals conformed to a pattern widespread among Protestants in the 1830s and 1840s. Those decades were marked by what some historians have called “resurgent churchly traditions.” In various Protestant communities, movements arose to stress the particularities of their respective heritages. Thus Episcopalians had a high church movement emphasizing Anglican identity, Lutherans the Missouri Synod and C. F. W. Walther stressing the distinctiveness of the Book of Concord, and Baptists in the South an Old Landmark movement claiming that their fellowship alone stood in continuity with the apostolic church. Interdenominational revivalism having seemingly played itself out, people were placing their hopes in smaller, more clearly defined communities of faith. As James D. Bratt has recently observed, “new voices” in the 1830s were offering people “communities of belonging where they could rest assured. These bodies needed to be marked by clear boundaries.... If the world would not roll on swiftly to the millennium some sanctuary within it might be found....”<sup>28</sup>

Even the New School itself, never as radical as the most partisan Old Schoolers had feared, turned toward a more self-consciously Presbyterian identity during the years of schism. Especially after the denomination's erstwhile ecumenical partner, the Congregationalists, repudiated the Plan of Union in 1852, the New School reemphasized loyalty to its heritage. New School judicatories also condemned the theological views associated with Oberlin College and Charles Finney. A major figure in the reorientation of the denomination was Henry Boynton Smith, who after 1850 served as a professor at Union Seminary, the unofficially New School institution in New York City. A theological mediator, he repudiated the extremes of innovation and restated the Reformed faith in such a way as to reassure the Old School. Moreover, by the close of the Civil War, the departure of the southerners from the Old School Church and the common experience of fervid loyalty to the Union on the part of both Old and New Schools in the North had prepared the way for the reunion of the denomination in 1870. But that is to begin another story, one that would have seemed unthinkable in the midst of crisis of authority and surcharged passions of 1837–38.<sup>29</sup>

## NOTES

The author wishes to express his appreciation to Jennifer M. Reece, whose aid in the research for this article was invaluable.

<sup>1</sup>"State of the Church," *The Presbyterian* 6 (18 June 1836): 2. On the schism of 1837–38, see George M. Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience: A Case Study of Thought and Theology in Nineteenth-Century America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 59–87.

<sup>2</sup>Isaac V. Brown, *A Historical Vindication of the Abrogation of the Plan of Union by the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia: William S. and Alfred Martien, 1855), iii.

<sup>3</sup>Leonard J. Trinterud, *The Forming of an American Tradition: A Re-examination of Colonial Presbyterianism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1949), 14–37; Williston Walker, *Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1960; original ed., 1893), 409–39, 463–523.

<sup>4</sup>Nathan O. Hatch and Harry S. Stout, eds., *Jonathan Edwards and the American Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Bryan F. Le Beau, *Jonathan Dickinson and the Formative Years of Ameri-*

*can Presbyterianism* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997); Patricia U. Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America* (New York: Oxford University Press 1986), 206; John Von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism, 1620–1957* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1992), 263.

<sup>5</sup>Robert Hastings Nichols, *Presbyterianism in New York State: A History of the Synod and Its Predecessors*, ed. James Hastings Nichols (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), 70–83.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 83–86.

<sup>7</sup>See, for example Charles Foster, *An Errand of Mercy: The Evangelical United Front, 1790–1837* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1960), 121–55; Clifford M. Drury, *Presbyterian Panorama: One Hundred and Fifty Years of National Missions History* (Philadelphia: Board of Christian Education, PCUSA, 1952), 52–76; Peter J. Wosh, *Spreading the Word: The Bible Business in Nineteenth-Century America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 74.

<sup>8</sup>Earl A. Pope, *New England Calvinism and the Disruption of the Presbyterian Church* (New York: Garland, 1987), 5–30. This work is a published version of Pope's 1962 Ph.D. dissertation at Brown University.

<sup>9</sup>In this and subsequent paragraphs on the New Divinity, I am heavily indebted to William Breitenbach, "The Consistent Calvinism of the New Divinity Movement," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 41 (April 1984): 241–64; Joseph A. Conforti, *Samuel Hopkins and the New Divinity Movement: Calvinism, the Congregational Ministry, and Reform in New England between the Great Awakenings* (Grand Rapids: Christian University Press, 1981); David W. Kling, *A Field of Divine Wonders: The New Divinity and Village Revivals in Northwestern Connecticut, 1792–1822* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993); and Mark Valeri, *Law and Providence in Joseph Bellamy's New England: The Origins of the New Divinity in Revolutionary America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). These works present a more evenhanded assessment of the New Divinity than the often insightful (but also polemical) Joseph Haroutunian, *Piety Versus Moralism: The Passing of the New England Theology* (New York: Henry Holt, 1932).

<sup>10</sup>Breitenbach, "Consistent Calvinism," 258.

<sup>11</sup>Miller's committee is quoted in Pope, *New England Calvinism*, 51. Marsden, *Evangelical Mind*, 39–45.

<sup>12</sup>*Minutes of the Presbyterian Church in America, 1706–1788*, ed. Guy S. Klett (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Historical Society, 1976), 103–4, 142; Trinterud, *Forming of an American Tradition*, 38–52; Marilyn J. Westerkamp, *Triumph of the Laity: Scots-Irish Piety and the Great Awakening, 1625–1760* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 150–56; Elizabeth I. Nybakken, "New Light on the Old Side: Irish Influences on Colonial Presbyterianism," *Journal of American History* 68 (March 1982): 813–32.

<sup>13</sup>Pope, *New England Calvinism*, 62–106; Marsden, *Evangelical Mind*, 45–52; Bruce Kuklick, *Churchmen and Philosophers: From Jonathan Edwards to John Dewey* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 94–111.

<sup>14</sup>Pope, *New England Calvinism*, 169–208; Marsden, *Evangelical Mind*, 52–55.

<sup>15</sup>Pope, *New England Calvinism*, 175–76; Marsden, *Evangelical Mind*, 55–58; L. C. Rudolph, *Hoosier Zion: The Presbyterians in Early Indiana* (New Haven:

Yale University Press, 1963) 123–28.

<sup>16</sup>Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 196. The “Testimony and Memorial” is excerpted in Maurice W. Armstrong, Lefferts A. Loetscher, and Charles A. Anderson, eds., *The Presbyterian Enterprise: Sources of American Presbyterian History* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), 153–56. The issue of proper order and the fear of voluntary societies focused particularly on missionary work; see Earl R. MacCormac, “Missions and the Presbyterian Schism of 1837,” *Church History* 32 (March 1963): 32–45.

<sup>17</sup>Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, ed. William G. McLoughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960; original ed., 1835), 192; Perry Miller, *The Life of the Mind in America: From the Revolution to the Civil War* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963), 63. On Finney, see Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); and Keith J. Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney 1792–1875: Revivalist and Reformer* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1987).

<sup>18</sup>Catharine A. Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740–1845* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 276; Lois A. Boyd and R. Douglas Brackenridge, *Presbyterian Women in America: Two Centuries of a Quest for Status*, second ed. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996), 94; Gordon S. Wood, “The Democratization of Mind in the American Revolution,” in Library of Congress Symposia on the American Revolution, *Leadership in the American Revolution* (Washington, 1974), 63–89; Robert H. Wiebe, *The Opening of American Society: From the Adoption of the Constitution to the Eve of Disunion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 295. See also Richard D. Brown, *Modernization: The Transformation of American Life, 1600–1865* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), 74–158; David Hackett Fischer, *The Revolution of American Conservatism: The Federalist Party in the Era of Jeffersonian Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 188–99; Charles H. Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815–1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 229–355; Chilton Williamson, *American Suffrage: From Property to Democracy, 1760–1860* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), esp. 117–259 and 545–67; Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 229–335.

<sup>19</sup>Paul A. Gilje, *Rioting in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 63; Leonard L. Richards, “Gentlemen of Property and Standing”: *Anti-Abolition*

*Mobs in Jacksonian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 10–12. The publication surveyed by Richards was *Niles’ Weekly Register*.

<sup>20</sup>*Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America ... A.D. 1789 to A.D. 1820 Inclusive* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, [1847]), 692. See also Andrew E. Murray, *Presbyterians and the Negro—A History* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Historical Society, 1966), 3–28, 67–102; Robert H. Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 129–62.

<sup>21</sup>Hammond is quoted in William Lee Miller, *Arguing About Slavery: John Quincy Adams and the Great Battle in the United States Congress* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 39; Richards, “Gentlemen of Property and Standing,” 81.

<sup>22</sup>For differing views, see C. Bruce Staiger, “Abolitionism and the Presbyterian Schism of 1837–1838,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 36 (Dec. 1949): 391–414; Elwyn A. Smith, “The Role of the South in the Presbyterian Schism of 1837–38,” *Church History* 29 (Mar. 1960): 44–63; Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind*, 250–51; Murray, *Presbyterians and the Negro*, 103–5.

<sup>23</sup>“Mr. Barnes’s Appeal to the Assembly,” *New York Observer* 32 (6 Aug. 1836): 125.

<sup>24</sup>“The General Assembly,” *New York Observer* 15 (19 Aug. 1837): 130.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.* Breckinridge’s association of the Long Parliament with the execution of Charles is misleading, for it was only after the Long Parliament was purged and became the Rump Parliament that the monarch was tried and executed.

<sup>26</sup>*Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (1837), 504. For further discussion of these events, see Marsden, *Evangelical Mind*, 59–87; Pope, *New England Calvinism*, 295–347.

<sup>27</sup>*Minutes of the General Assembly* (1837), 507.

<sup>28</sup>James D. Bratt, “The Reorientation of American Protestantism, 1835–1845,” *Church History* 67 (March 1998): 69. For an older account of the triumph of what the authors call “resurgent churchly traditions” in the 1830s and ‘40s, see H. Shelton Smith, Robert T. Handy, and Lefferts A. Loetscher, *American Christianity: An Historical Interpretation with Representative Documents*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1960, 1963), 2: 66–118.

<sup>29</sup>Marsden, *Evangelical Mind*, 128–229. For a recent account confirming the conservative bent of the New School, see Leo P. Hirrel, *Children of Wrath: New School Calvinism and Antebellum Reform* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998).

