THE OLD SCHOOL INHERITANCE:

STRICT ORTHODOXY + WIDE CATHOLICITY

By

Dr. J. Wesley White

June 20, 2025

CONTENTS

CHAPTER

CHAPTER ONE

My Journey to Wide Catholicity

I had embraced the strict orthodoxy of our Presbyterian fathers but had missed their wide catholicity.

I grew up in the Wesleyan tradition, but in late high school and college, I began searching for something more—something deeper. That search led me to Reformed theology. I was drawn to its commitment to thinking through all of Scripture systematically. This led me to read a wide range of theologians.

That reading also raised questions. I wanted to give other traditions a fair hearing. I explored Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy—even while in seminary, studying to become a Reformed pastor. I almost turned to Anglicanism, drawn by its sacramental theology. But in one corner of Anglicanism, I encountered an emphasis on apostolic succession as a chief mark of the church. It didn't sit right. It felt like an overemphasis on the wrong thing.

Then I read Charles Hodge's *Discussions of Church Polity*.[1] His writing helped clarify my unease. As Robert Lewis Dabney put it, the fundamental problem of this perspective was that ". . . all these Scriptures [about the church] were quoted as though they applied to one organized, visible body of believers."[2] Instead, these passages refer to the invisible communion that all saints have with Christ and the love that flows out of it. That reality should give rise to a variety of outward forms grounded in a basic unity: one faith, Spirit, Lord, Father, and baptism. The key was manifesting the spiritual unity of the church. Uniting in one, visible organization was a very distant secondary goal.

Despite this, I still had questions. Great help came from reading Francis Turretin's *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, which addressed nearly every biblical and theological issue in a clear and concise way.[3] I had the privilege of reading through it with Dr. J. Mark Beach of Mid-America Seminary, who was writing his doctoral

---

[1] Charles Hodge, *Discussion in Church Polity* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1878).

[2] Robert L. Dabney, "What Is Christian Union?" in *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, ed. C. R. Vaughan, vol. 2 (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1891), 433.

[3] Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger, 3 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992–1997).

dissertation on Turretin's covenant theology at the time. We discussed it constantly—it was like earning a second seminary degree.[4]

I was ordained in July 2005 in a small Presbyterian church in South Dakota, near the Wyoming border. There, I immersed myself in the details of Reformed theology. I later completed a Master of Theology through Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, where I translated Leonard Rijssen's *Summary of Elenctic Theology*—a kind of miniature Turretin.[5]

My passion for sound theology led me into denominational debates over the Federal Vision. I believed—and still do—that the sacramental overemphasis and approach to justification taught by some connected with that movement compromised key elements of Reformed and evangelical theology. I regret, however, some of the ways I engaged in that debate. I made many apologies and developed friendships with those I once strongly opposed. Still, I do not regret contending for the theological truths at stake. Strict orthodoxy matters.

In our local church, we emphasized Reformed theology heavily. We kept other churches at arm's length unless they were distinctly Reformed. Membership required affirmation of Reformed Doctrine. It was a constant theme.

But in late 2011, something began to shift. My spirit felt dry. I began to wonder if I truly belonged in the ministry. I considered leaving or changing churches. In 2012, I took a month-long sabbatical to sort things out. At the time, I had taken an interest in the Civil War and was reading Robert Lewis Dabney's biography of Stonewall Jackson. We stayed in a cabin in Virginia, and I visited the battlefields of the Shenandoah Valley while reading about them.

What changed my life was not Jackson's military genius, virtues, or flaws—it was his church membership. When Jackson moved to Lexington, VA he attended various evangelical churches but ultimately settled in a Presbyterian church, despite objecting to some of its doctrinal standards. As Dabney wrote, "To some things embodied in these standards he strongly objected. . . ."[6] But the Presbyterian leaders told him that "the Presbyterian Church expected uniformity of belief on these points, of none but its officers, and only exacted of its private members a profession of those vital doctrines of redemption, in which all Christians agree. . . ."[7] As Dabney stated in his *Discussions*, Vol. 2, "As to the flock, there is no church under heaven more catholic and liberal than ours, in receiving all, whatever their doctrinal differences from us, provided they truly receive Christ as their Redeemer."[8]

---

[4] J. Mark Beach, *Christ and the Covenant: Francis Turretin's Federal Theology as a Defense of the Doctrine of Grace* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007),

[5] Leonardus Riissen, *Summa Theologiae Elencticae* (Amsterdam: J. P. Haring, 1876).

[6] Robert Lewis Dabney, *Life and Campaigns of Lieut.-Gen. Thomas J. Jackson (Stonewall Jackson)* (New York: Blelock & Company, 1866), 84.

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] Robert Lewis Dabney, "Broad Churchism," in *Discussions: Evangelical*, vol. 2, ed. C. R. Vaughan (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1890), 450.

A light bulb went on. I had been doing it wrong.

I went back to Hodge. I had read but not appreciated something similar which he said in *Discussions of Church Polity*: "One thing, however, is plain, viz.: that we are bound to receive all those whom God has received; and are forbidden to require more for communion with us, than he requires for communion with him."[9] How had I missed it? It wasn't just the Presbyterian theologians—it aligned perfectly with Scripture. In Acts, people were "added to the number" based on a simple profession of Jesus as Lord and Savior. Within moments, it all seemed so obvious to me.

This realization transformed my ministry . . . and our church. We began receiving Christians who had been on the sidelines but were not Reformed. We no longer held up doctrinal precision as a barrier to membership but sought to nurture believers from where they were. Evangelism also became more natural—most people are closer to a basic profession of faith than to a robust understanding of the Reformed system.

This shift also changed our relationships with other churches. We began to work with all Christians wherever possible. I joined the local evangelical pastors' meeting, formed friendships across denominational lines, collaborated on youth events and evangelism, and invited a broader range of preachers into our pulpit. We held fast to strict orthodoxy while embracing wide catholicity. It brought deep joy to me and to our congregation, and it allowed us to bless others more fully.

I tried simply to live this out rather than trumpeting it, but I still had questions. Was this really how Old School Presbyterians approached things? Was the combination of strict orthodoxy and wide catholicity peripheral to their system, or was it central?

This book argues the latter: strict orthodoxy + wide catholicity is not just peripheral. It is a major feature of Old School Presbyterianism and part of our rightful inheritance as Presbyterians.

It's an inheritance worth recovering. Those who emphasize strict orthodoxy often feel uneasy about the tone and method of some of their allies (as I was in the 2010s). They worry that love for Christ and others may be overshadowed. Others emphasize love and unity but don't want to lose orthodoxy. Both long to unite truth and love, but few models exist. The model is there—in the Old School Presbyterian tradition. Everyone sees their commitment to orthodoxy. Fewer have seen how seriously they embraced catholicity. That part of their inheritance is ripe for retrieval.

It may be just what our churches need today.

This book is an invitation to rediscover and appropriate the wide catholicity of the Old School tradition in today's conservative Reformed churches.

I begin this work by showing that Old School Presbyterians explicitly taught and practiced wide catholicity. Then, I contrast this with their warnings against the opposite—bigotry and sectarianism.

---

[9] Hodge, *Discussions in Church Polity*, 223.

Chapters 2-4 answer the what. Chapters 5-7 answer the why. Why did they hold this view? I explore their biblical arguments and how these harmonized with the *Westminster Standards*. Their views grew from two key theological concepts: their understanding of the church and of fundamental doctrines.

Finally, in chapters 8–9, I return to strict orthodoxy—why they insisted on it, why they valued denominational distinctives, and how they saw the unity of the church amid its divided external form.

My goal is that we would understand the Old School's wide catholicity and consider how to apply it today—for our personal growth, for the unity of Christ's church, and for the glory of God.

CHAPTER TWO

The Affirmation of Wide Catholicity

For Old School Presbyterians, the affirmation of wide catholicity began with the flock—the members of the church. The demand for strict orthodoxy was confined to the ministry and elders (three-office view).

Robert Lewis Dabney noted that no other church admitted all Christians into membership the way the Presbyterian Church did. "As to the flock, there is no church under heaven more catholic and liberal than ours, in receiving all, whatever their doctrinal differences from us, provided they truly receive Christ as their Redeemer."[1]

Charles Hodge affirmed this as the consistent practice of the Presbyterian Church. Reflecting on its history in the United States, he wrote: "It is believed that during all this period no one was ever debarred from the communion of saints, who was regarded as a sincere disciple of Christ. . . ."[2] But this wide catholicity in membership came with no corresponding laxity in ministerial orthodoxy. He continued, "no one was admitted to any office in the Church, or, if admitted, was allowed to retain his standing, who dissented in any material point from the system of doctrine contained in our standards"[3] The local church, in other words, maintained strict orthodoxy in its ministry and wide catholicity in its membership.

Hodge elaborated: "[W]e may guard our ministry and admit none to the office of teacher in our churches, who do not hold that system of doctrine which we believe God has revealed, and which cannot be rejected in any of its parts without evil to the souls of men. . . ."[4] This vigilance over the teaching office did not imply that all doctrines in the *Westminster Standards* were essential to salvation, nor that sincere believers in Christ who differed on some points should be rejected. One could uphold a strict orthodoxy in ministry and "still recognise as Christian brethren all who hold the essential doctrines of the gospel, and who love the Lord Jesus Christ."[5]

---

[1] Robert Lewis Dabney, "Broad Churchism," in *Discussions: Evangelical*, vol. 2, ed. C. R. Vaughan (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1890), 450.

[2] Charles Hodge, *Discussion in Church Polity* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1878), 221.

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] *Ibid.,* 224.

[5] *Ibid.*

As for how to identify that "system of doctrine," Hodge acknowledged, "every Church must apply it upon their own responsibility."[6] But the criteria for membership were simpler and clearer: "One thing, however, is plain, viz.: that we are bound to receive all those whom God has received; and are forbidden to require more for communion with us, than he requires for communion with him."[7] For Hodge, receiving all true Christians into membership wasn't optional—it was commanded.

As we will see more fully in the next section, this did not mean that the Presbyterian Church viewed itself as the only true church. Nor did it mean that it treated churches who disagreed with their doctrines as heretical. Dabney rejected the idea of fusing all denominations into one mega-church based on the lowest common denominator—a concept he called "broad churchism." Yet he insisted that, in other respects, Presbyterianism was one of the most truly catholic Protestant communions. He wrote:

> The Presbyterian communion, the strictest of all in exacting full orthodoxy, according to her standard, of all her ministry, is also the most truly catholic of all the Protestant churches. Her overtures to other branches of Christ's church, and, whenever they are accepted, her actual relations with them, are of the most fraternal character.[8]

In short, so long as its standards for ministry were not compromised, Presbyterianism was eager to extend fraternal fellowship to all evangelical churches. Wide catholicity extended beyond church membership to inter-church relations.

Edward Morris, the Old School Presbyterian theologian and principal of Lane College in Ohio, called this posture a special mission of the Presbyterian Church. Like Dabney, he opposed "broad churchism": "Presbyterianism is not indeed called to ignore or undervalue its own distinctive marks and principles, or to sweep aside any such marks or principles cherished by other denominations:—to reduce the aggregate of evangelical Christianity to that pulpy indifferentism, which has been fitly described as 'a mush of sects.'"[9] Yet he believed that Presbyterianism was called to exemplify its own catholicity for the sake of the whole visible church: "Yet that Presbyterianism, as we believe, has been called of God to a special mission toward all Protestant bodies: a mission to proclaim and to exemplify before all its own true catholicity, in order to bring all into closer, more loving and fruitful fellowship around the central verities of the common Gospel."[10] So foundational was this principle to Presbyterianism, Morris

---

[6] *Ibid.,* 223.
[7] *Ibid.*
[8] Dabney, "Broad Churchism," 457.
[9] Edward D. Morris, "Catholic Elements in Presbyterianism," *The Princeton Review* 54, no. 16 (January–June 1878): 124.
[10] *Ibid.*

argued, that the Presbyterian Church bore a responsibility to reach out to other churches as a living witness to true catholicity.

Joel Parker shared this vision. A 19th-century Presbyterian theologian and revivalist, Parker sought to integrate evangelical fervor with confessional orthodoxy, shaping the life of American Presbyterianism through both preaching and academic leadership at Princeton. He acknowledged that this very catholic spirit had sometimes come at a cost: "The catholic spirit of the Presbyterian Church, in acknowledging all evangelical denominations as true Christian churches, has led us as a people to care too little for our own peculiar organization." Yet he welcomed a renewed appreciation for orthodoxy, writing, "a salutary reaction has been experienced, and we are fast learning that the broadest Christian charity is perfectly consistent with zeal in behalf of our own Church." Why did this matter? Was it merely to preserve Presbyterian distinctives? No—Parker argued that Presbyterianism must maintain its character "for the very reason that the enlargement of its influence tends to diffuse the same catholic and charitable principles among those denominations which do not profess any such unexclusiveness."[11] In other words, attention to Presbyterian distinctiveness served a broader purpose: to teach the rest of the church how to hold both strict orthodoxy and wide catholicity together.

Thomas Smyth, a 19th-century Southern Presbyterian theologian, pastor, and prolific writer, likewise championed both orthodoxy and catholicity. He was no moderate—he famously walked out of a presbytery meeting over its decision to admit Congregationalists and New School Presbyterians to the ministry, believing it compromised strict ministerial standards.[12] Yet Smyth never abandoned catholicity. In his writings, he described the Presbyterian Church as "at once liberal and orthodox."[13] He insisted that "only those truths which are fundamental and necessary to the salvation of the soul should constitute the terms of general Christian communion, the basis of charity, and the bond of general Christian union and co-operation"[14] And he concluded his reflections on the liberal spirit of the church with this moving invitation:

---

[11] Joel Parker, *The Presbyterian's Hand-Book of the Church: For the Use of Members, Deacons, Elders, and Ministers* (n.p.: Joel Parker, 1861), ii.

[12] PCA Historical Center, *"Biography of the Rev. Thomas Smyth, D.D."*, PCA History (accessed June 19, 2025).

[13] Thomas Smyth, *Complete Works of Rev. Thomas Smyth, D.D.*, vol. 3 (Boston: Crocker & Brewster, 1908), 159. This is not liberal in the sense of modernist or "radical." Rather, it refers to wide catholicity. When J. Gresham Machen used this word, he was referring to modernism, a type of Christianity that tended to deny its supernatural elements. At the same time, Machen was very "liberal" or catholic when it came to those who were historic Christians. He wrote, "Far more serious still is the division between the Church of Rome and evangelical Protestantism in all its forms. Yet how great is the common heritage which unites the Roman Catholic Church, with its maintenance of the authority of Holy Scripture and with its acceptance of the great early creeds, to devout Protestants today! We would not indeed obscure the difference which divides us from Rome. The gulf is indeed profound. But profound as it is, it seems almost trifling compared to the abyss which stands between us and many ministers of our own Church" (J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* [New York: Macmillan, 1923], 52).

[14] Thomas Smyth, *"The Fundamental Doctrines of Christianity: The True and Only Required Basis of Charity and United Christian Effort"*, address delivered at Philadelphia, on the twenty-second

> Ye who bear upon you the impress of a divine acceptance, who are clad in the spiritual vestments of a divine calling, who speak the language of heaven's adopted sons, however men may reject, scorn, or denounce you, come in, and let us, as brethren, dwell together in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace, as having one Lord, one faith, and one hope.[15]

Wide catholicity was more than a principle. It was a posture of generous and loving engagement with all who truly received Christ and loved Him.

We will see in the next chapter how these principles shaped real ecclesial life in practice.

anniversary of the American Sunday-School Union, May 17, 1846 (Philadelphia: American Sunday-School Union, 1846), 26.

[15] Smyth, *Complete Works*, 3:161.

CHAPTER THREE

Wide Catholicity in Practice

Membership

The Old School Presbyterians were unflinching in their commitment to strict orthodoxy. But they were just as committed to wide catholicity. What did that look like in practice? Orthodoxy was upheld by requiring full subscription to the *Westminster Standards* for ministers. But what of the laity? What of Christians in other churches? Other ministers? Other denominations? Other Christian institutions? Here we see the brilliance of the Old School vision: a church narrow at the helm but broad at the base—a communion strict in government yet expansive in charity.

We have already touched on the wide catholicity of the Presbyterian Church in regard to membership. But it deserves fuller attention.

Recall Dabney's striking declaration: there was no church under heaven "more catholic" in its approach to members and the flock. This generosity was grounded in theological realism—an acknowledgment that "some doctrines of the Christian system are not fundamental to salvation. By this we mean that a soul who embraces the fundamental and necessary points will be saved, notwithstanding his failure, through ignorance or misconception, to embrace the former."[1] (449). This led the Presbyterians to "gladly receive into the body of Christ's church catholic, and into the communion of saints, all such persons, although they do not receive sundry truths which we are assured God has revealed."[2]

Membership in the Presbyterian Church was not contingent upon one's acceptance of Presbyterian distinctives. Any believer—regardless of their views on polity or secondary doctrine—could become a member. Presbyterians deliberately sought to make the door of the visible church as wide as the kingdom of God. This was no mere pastoral suggestion. It was a constitutional mandate. As Dabney noted, "Our Directory, Chap. IX. Sec. 1, instructs pastors to inquire only whether the life of the applicant be

[1] Robert Lewis Dabney, "Broad Churchism," in *Discussions: Evangelical*, vol. 2, ed. C. R. Vaughan (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1890), 449.

[2] *Ibid.*

consistent, and if he has knowledge to discern the Lord's body."[3] What did this catholicity look like in action? Consider again the case of Stonewall Jackson. Though Jackson visited many churches, he was drawn to Presbyterianism. He examined its doctrine closely:

> The result of his inquiries was, that on the 22d of November, 1851, he was received, by profession of his faith, as a member of that church. His accession in that mode was an avowal that he came in, not as one transferred from some other denomination in the visible church to the Presbyterian, but as a new recruit from the world without. He did not, however, take this step until he had thoroughly studied the catechisms and Confession of Faith. . . . To some things embodied in these standards he strongly objected . . . His chief difficulty was found in the great truth of God's absolute sovereignty . . . His opinions, at that time, leaned strongly to the system known as Arminianism. . . . Being informed . . . that the Presbyterian Church expected uniformity of belief on these points, of none but its officers, and only exacted of its private members a profession of those vital doctrines of redemption, in which all Christians agree, he preferred to adopt it as his own.[4]

This did not happen casually. Jackson wrestled with these doctrines over months. Dabney recorded a pivotal moment:

> Many months after... [he] disclosed so serious a difficulty in his views concerning the doctrines of God's decree and sovereign providence, that [his friend] . . . remarked, "Major, if you have these opinions, you had better become a Methodist." . . . Jackson . . . answered, "If you think so, then come with me, and let us see Dr. White about it." . . . At the end of it [Dr. White] remarked, "Well, Major . . . in your practical life you are so good a Presbyterian, that I think you may safely remain where you are." . . . It was not very long before all his difficulties gave way. . . . He became one of the firmest though least bigoted advocates of the Calvinistic scheme.[5]

---

[3] *Ibid.* Charles Hodge says the same: "Nothing, therefore, can be plainer than that our Church requires nothing more than credible evidence of Christian character as the condition of Christian communion. Of that evidence the Church officers are to judge. Not one word is said of the adoption of the Confession of Faith, or of anything but the evidences of piety. Any man, therefore, who gives evidence of being a Christian, we are bound by the rules of our Church to admit to our communion. And so far from there being the slightest intimation that the adoption of the whole system of our doctrine contained in our standards is necessary to a man s being a Christian, there is the strongest evidence to the contrary (*Discussion in Church Polity* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1878], 220-221).

[4] Robert Lewis Dabney, *Life and Campaigns of Lieut.-Gen. Thomas J. Jackson (Stonewall Jackson)* (New York: Blelock & Company, 1866), 84.

[5] *Ibid.* Note that this was not a one off. They all knew that the principle of Presbyterianism was widely catholic in regard to the flock. Anyone who was a Christian could be a member. However, when they saw that someone agreed more with some other congregation of the visible church, they did not mind

This story is worth careful consideration. It captures how the Old School Presbyterians exercised both firm conviction and pastoral charity.

A powerful test case for this principle was Baptists. Baptists reject infant baptism, an important feature of the *Westminster Standards*. Yet even the strictest Presbyterians recognize Baptists as Christians. Few would dare to write Spurgeon out of the kingdom. So, what of the ordinary Baptist who cannot bring himself to baptize his infant children? The Presbyterian Church answered clearly: if he belongs to the kingdom, he belongs in the church. The General Assembly affirmed, "Parents declining to present their children for baptism are not to be refused on account of scruples concerning infant baptism." It added, "yet in every such case the Session must judge of the expediency of admitting them."[6]

This latter part should be read in light of Jackson's experience. The Assembly was not saying a person could ignore church government or reject its doctrine without consequence. But simply refraining from infant baptism was not cause for exclusion. Just as Jackson's friend playfully suggested he become a Methodist, so Sessions might at times advise a Baptist to consider a Baptist church. But the door remained open.

Christian Fellowship

This wide catholicity extended beyond church membership to active fellowship across denominational lines.

Consider Howard Crosby (1826–1891) who was a conservative Presbyterian pastor, theologian, and chancellor of New York University. A strong advocate for both orthodoxy and social reform, he was known for promoting Christian unity while defending doctrinal essentials. He opposed efforts to unify Protestantism through the *Book of Common Prayer*, yet he did not use theological differences as a pretext for isolation. He wrote:

> I am an out-and-out Presbyterian, but I find it a delight to work with my Episcopal friends in their admirable Church Temperance Society; I have worked side by side with Baptists and Methodists in City Mission and in Young Men's

---

suggesting that they might be happier in that branch of the visible church. This included Arminian churches such as the Methodist Church. Dabney explained how this worked out this way: "If any Northern Presbyterian ministers or elders wish to come to us, who personally hold that sound position held by Dr. Charles Hodge as to the usurpations of their Assemblies, and as to the New School defects of doctrine, we should receive them, though in their secular opinions anti-Confederates like Dr. Hodge. If their laity choose to come to us, even uninstructed and blinded as to these defects of Northern Presbyterianism, we should receive them, provided they will cooperate peaceably; just as we would receive a layman with Arminian opinions, under the apostolic rule: 'Them that are weak in the faith receive ye;' hoping to win them to our truer Presbyterianism" (Robert L. Dabney, "What Is Christian Union?" in *Discussions: Evangelical*, ed. C. R. Vaughan, vol. 2 [Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1891],527)

[6] John Aspinwall Hodge, *What Is Presbyterian Law as Defined by the Church Courts?* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath-School Work, 1899),140.

> Christian Associations, and it never occurred to any of us to think of denominational differences.[7]

He went on: "I am a member of two ministerial organizations where ministers of all the Protestant denominations meet . . . and the ties of friendship and esteem are equally strong between all." He said, "Here is Christian union of the highest sort."[8] This was Old School catholicity on display: not mere tolerance but joyful cooperation—unity rooted in a shared love for Christ.

Even John Lafayette Girardeau, a vigorous defender of Calvinist doctrine against Arminianism, wrote, "I have sung and prayed and preached with Evangelical Arminians, and have been with them in precious seasons of reviving grace; some of them are among my most cherished friends, and some I have seen cross the Jordan of death whose shoes I would have carried . . ."[9] Can we say the same?

Dabney echoed this. In "The Moral Effects of a Free Justification," he traced Wesley's evangelical awakening to the Moravians: "[T]he great founder of the Wesleyan communion was so largely indebted . . . to the descendants of this Moravian communion for his final and joyful establishment in the peace of the gospel."[10] After that, said Dabney, "he was able, with a triumphant hand, to sweep his hallowed lyre, as he took u that strain which was silenced no more, and which to-day he is singing in glory:

> Jesus, thy blood and righteousness
> My beauty are, my glorious dress;
> Midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed,
> With joy shall I lift up my head."[11]

The Old School rejoiced in gospel unity—whether experienced personally or encountered through the pen of another.

Denominational Collegiality

Old School catholicity extended even further—to recognition of other churches as true churches of Jesus Christ.

Edward Morris observed that strict orthodoxy was upheld by requiring ministers to be true to the Westminster system "not in all minute *ipsissima verba*, but as containing the system taught in the Scriptures." But wide catholicity was manifest in the

---

[7] Howard Crosby, "Open Letters," *The Century Magazine* 31, no. 5 (March 1886):797.

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] John L. Girardeau, *Calvinism and Evangelical Arminianism: Compared as to Election, Reprobation, Justification, and Related Doctrines* (Columbia, SC: W. J. Duffie; New York: Baker & Taylor, 1890)159–160.

[10] Robert L. Dabney, "The Moral Effects of a Free Justification," in *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, ed. C. R. Vaughan, vol. 1 (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1890), 81.

[11] *Ibid.*, 82.

church's open communion: "opening its communion-tables to all who love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity." Moreover, Presbyterians "recognize the validity of the sacraments and ordination" in other churches, and even welcome their ministers for occasional preaching.[12]

This was not exceptional. The 1837 Synod of Virginia issued a Pastoral Letter declaring that they freely acknowledged as "sister churches" those who adopted episcopal or congregational polity:

> We recognize the validity of their ministry and sacraments; we commune freely with them not only in our churches, but in theirs, unless excluded by their rules and principles.
>
> You know fully our practice of inviting their ministers into our pulpits, and their members to our communion-table.[13]

Smyth emphasized that this was not a liberal fringe view, but the position of "the 'straitest sect' among us."[14]

Smyth went even further. He called for visible unity in cooperative ministry: "by combining in common efforts, by prayer and other fit measures, for reviving religion at home, and extending the gospel by Christian missions to unenlightened regions." Through such unity, the church would once more provoke the world to say, "See how these Christians love one another." [15]

Pulpit exchanges were a particularly striking expression of this catholicity. Charles Hodge treated them as ordinary: "Presbyterians may recognize Methodist preachers as ministers of the gospel, and welcome them to their pulpits . . ."[16] How many

---

[12] Edward D. Morris, "Catholic Elements in Presbyterianism," *The Princeton Review* 54, no. 16 (January–June 1878): 124.

[13] Thomas Smyth, *Complete Works of Rev. Thomas Smyth, D.D.*, vol. 3 (Boston: Crocker & Brewster, 1908), 147.

[14] *Ibid.*

[15] Thomas Smyth, *"The Fundamental Doctrines of Christianity: The True and Only Required Basis of Charity and United Christian Effort"*, address delivered at Philadelphia, on the twenty-second anniversary of the American Sunday-School Union, May 17, 1846 (Philadelphia: American Sunday-School Union, 1846), 29. How does this work out? "By an express recognition of one another as brethren in Christ Jesus—by a free and cordial interchange of kind offices on the part of the pastors, which would tend to draw forth the fervent charity both of pastors and of their flocks, and would proclaim to the world their union in the truth—by combining in common efforts, by prayer and other fit measures, for reviving religion at home, and extending the gospel by Christian missions to unenlightened regions—and by fraternal and generous communications to the necessities of one another, their real unity would be felt and manifested, their brotherly love would grow, and the world be compelled once more to pronounce the eulogium, 'See how these Christians love one another'" (*ibid.*).

[16] Hodge, *Discussions in Church Polity*, 99. Here is the full context: "It is not necessary therefore that one denomination should concern itself how other denominational Churches exercise the right of appointing men to the ministry, provided it admit that they possess the right of appointment; and recognize those thus appointed as ministers of Christ. It can preserve the purity of its own ministry and Churches without incurring the charge of discourtesy or schism. Presbyterians may recognize Methodist

of our conservative Presbyterian churches would do the same today? Do we dare to be stricter than one of the strictest among us, Charles Hodge?

Conclusion

Wide catholicity was not an abstract principle. It took concrete form in the reception of all true believers into membership. It manifested itself in warm, joyful fellowship with Christians of all backgrounds. It bore fruit in shared work, shared mission, and shared pulpits. The Old School was uncompromising in guarding its doctrine and its government—but it did so with a hand extended to all who loved Christ. The Old School Presbyterians not only taught wide catholicity. They embodied it.

But what of the opposite? What of those who elevated sectarianism over catholicity? Were they merely tolerated?

In the next chapter, we will see that the Old School did more than advocate wide catholicity. It actively and vigorously opposed sectarianism.

---

preachers as ministers of the gospel, and welcome them to their pulpits, but they cannot be expected to receive them into their own body or make them pastors of their own Churches. The same of course may be said of Methodists in regard to Presbyterians" (*ibid.*)

CHAPTER FOUR

The Warning Against Abandoning Wide Catholicity

The Old School Presbyterians did not merely advocate for wide catholicity—they fiercely denounced its opposite: sectarianism and bigotry. Their insistence on catholicity was not a vague sentiment but a deliberate, principled stand against the spirit of exclusion and narrowness that so often masquerades as fidelity.

Edward Morris understood the ever-present danger: that love for the Reformed system could curdle into sectarianism. "The adherents of such a system are always in danger of exalting the system unduly, even in comparison with other forms of evangelical faith or polity."[1] In other words, the very clarity and precision of the Reformed faith could tempt its defenders to an overemphasis—to make the system itself supreme.

Morris enumerated how this deformity occurs. When believers elevate secondary differences, overemphasize their distinctives, and lose sight of shared truths, they risk slipping into what he calls "narrowness, intolerance, partisanship and dogmatism, and all the other errors into which undue denominational zeal, under whatever system, may plunge even sincere and earnest and thoughtful minds."[2] When theological priorities become distorted, even good men descend into bigotry.[3]

Crucially, Morris believed this was not a theoretical danger but a historical fact. In the years following the Westminster Assembly, he saw zeal for doctrinal rigor mutate into an exclusionary rigorism. The result? A pendulum swing into doctrinal

---

[1] Edward D. Morris, "Catholic Elements in Presbyterianism," *The Princeton Review* 54, no. 16 (January–June 1878): 101.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] Edward Morris explained how Calvin avoided this tendency: "He emphasizes over and over the two great marks, the faithful preaching of the Word and the right ministration of the sacraments ; asserts that wherever these are, the fruits of true piety will certainly be produced ; and declares, doubtless with reference to the diversities of opinion then current within Protestant circles, that no society in which these fruits abound, ought ever to be rejected or even challenged, though it might be chargeable with many faults. He exhorts to patience with imperfections and considerateness even toward error, warns against undue zeal for righteousness and the Donatistic demand for complete holiness within the household of faith, and avers that each true church will be known everywhere by its illustration of the gentle and loving temper of Christ and of Paul, the patient apostle" (*Theology of the Westminster Symbols: A Commentary Historical, Doctrinal, Practical, on the Confession of Faith and Catechisms and the Related Formularies of the Presbyterian Churches* [Columbus, OH: Champlin Press, 1900], 606-607).

indifferentism. "The Gospel itself may be preached, even by earnest minds, in a tone so denunciatory, or in proportions so distorted, as to produce nothing but a brood of errorists and of bold transgressors"[4] In contrast, he argued that strict orthodoxy yoked with a wide-hearted catholicity is one of the best defenses against doctrinal decay.[5]

Archibald Alexander Hodge, a paragon of Reformed orthodoxy, also stood firmly against sectarianism. He called it what it is: schism. While he affirmed the importance of doctrine, he did not mistake it for a license to divide Christ's body. In defining schism, he included not only heresy and immorality but also "pride, bigotry, and exclusive churchism"; "all party spirit, jealousy, and selfish rivalry"; and "all want of the spirit of fraternal love and cooperation." These, he warned, "tend to the marring and dividing of the body of Christ."[6] A.A. Hodge's vision of catholicity was not in tension with orthodoxy but was its necessary companion.

The Old School Presbyterians found biblical warrant for this wide catholicity in Romans 14 (as we shall see more below). There, Charles Hodge detected a potent rebuke of sectarianism, which he described as "censoriousness"—a zeal to find and condemn error in others. He minced no words:

> A denunciatory or censorious spirit is hostile to the spirit of the gospel. It is an encroachment on the prerogatives of the only Judge of the heart and conscience: it blinds the mind to moral distinctions, and prevents the discernment between matters unessential and those vitally important; and it leads us to forget our own accountableness, and to overlook our own faults, in our zeal to denounce others.[7]

Such a spirit is not a mark of fidelity but a betrayal of the gospel's heart. Romans 14 teaches wide catholicity by condemning this very censoriousness.

---

[4] Morris, "Catholic Elements in Presbyterianism," 118.

[5] Morris went on, "They may place overmuch stress on what is really valuable in the system : they may magnify its points of difference, and extol these as primary excellences : they may become blind to its remaining weaknesses or imperfections. And, from this experience, the descent is gradual and easy to narrowness, to intolerance, to partisanship and dogmatism, and all the other errors into which undue denominational zeal, under whatever system, may plunge even sincere and earnest and thoughtful minds" (*ibid.,* 161).

[6] A.A. Hodge said: "Hence all denial of the supreme Godhead and Lordship of Christ is schism. All denial of the body of catholic doctrine, common to the whole confessing Church, and embraced in the great ecumenical creeds, is schism. All sin against the Holy Ghost, every breach of the law of holiness and defect in spiritual mindedness, tends to the marring and dividing of the body of Christ. All pride, bigotry, and exclusive churchism; all claim that the true Church is essentially identical with a certain external organization or form of organization, or with a definite external succession of officers; all denial of the validity of the ministry and sacraments of any bodies professing the true faith, and bearing evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit is schism. All party spirit, jealousy, and selfish rivalry; all unnecessary multiplication of denominational organizations; all want of the spirit of fraternal love and cooperation in the service of the common Master, tends to the marring and dividing of the body of Christ" ("Open Letters," *The Century Magazine* 31, no. 5 [March 1886]: 799).

[7] Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1873), 676.

William S. Plumer, another stalwart of Old School orthodoxy, echoed Hodge. In his commentary on Romans, he exhorted believers: "So long as there are different Christian denominations in the world, let the members of each set an example of courtesy, liberality, brotherly kindness and charity."[8] He then cited Philip Doddridge, who offered this withering rebuke of sectarianism:

> Let all the different sects and parties of Christians study to imbibe more of the equitable and lovely temper which the apostle here expresses in so genuine a manner. The divisions of the church are not to be healed by imposing our own sentiments, phrases and forms, and censuring and harassing those that will not acquiesce in them. Such a temper will only engender strife, and mutual provocations will produce mutual increasing resentment.[9]

For these men, Romans 14 was not a polite suggestion. It was a call to reject sectarian warfare and embody the generosity of Christ toward all who bear his name.

No one articulated the threat of bigotry more forcefully than Thomas Smyth. While uncompromising in doctrine, he waged a parallel war against theological fanaticism. He defined bigotry as "an attachment to certain doctrines, forms, or party, for other reasons than their intrinsic excellence; and in other measures than is warranted by their importance."[10] The result? "[A]n obstinate and blind attachment to some particular system; unreasonable zeal and warmth and excessive prejudice and illiberality towards those who differ."[11] Smyth even called it a form of "religious insanity"—a spiritual obsession that blinds a person to everything outside their sectarian tunnel vision.[12]

Smyth did not leave catholicity undefined. In his address to the Sunday School Union, he declared: "To claim to be united to Christ, therefore, as a church or as an individual, and to refuse to hold Christian communion with those whom we are bound to confess Christ has received, is either wickedness, impiety, 19ecognize, self-righteous pride, or preposterous folly." (27) And further:

---

[8] William Swan Plumer, *Commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1870), 611.

[9] Cited in *ibid*. Philip Doddridge (1702–1751) was a Nonconformist minister and educator whose Calvinist convictions and irenic spirit made him a model of evangelical catholicity in eighteenth-century English Protestantism.

[10] Thomas Smyth, *Complete Works of Rev. Thomas Smyth, D.D.*, vol. 3 (Boston: Crocker & Brewster, 1908), 135.

[11] *Ibid*., 136.

[12] Smyth adds, "Such doctrines, practices, or forms, may be in themselves correct, or even scriptural, but an importance is attached to them disproportioned to their true value ; and consequences deduced from them, and a course of action founded upon them, which are not warranted by a sound understanding, or by anything in the word of God" (*ibid*.).

> Truth is all-important, but all truth is not equally important. And while truth is essential to Christian character and hope, so also are charity, and peace, and union, essential to the Christian character both of individuals and of churches ; and to make anything, therefore, however true or even important it may be in itself, but which is not essential to personal salvation, an excuse for the failure of these things, is to "turn the truth of God into a lie."[13]

This is not indifference to truth. It is a sober recognition of its proper hierarchy. Smyth understood that love and unity are not accessories to orthodoxy—they are essential marks of it.

Charles Hodge shared this conviction with equal fire. In language that spares no punches, he lamented the refusal of churches to recognize other Christians as brethren:

> It is not the existence of sects, for that perhaps is unavoidable, but it is the refusal to recognize as brethren those who really love and serve Christ, that is to be condemned and deplored, It is this that has turned the ancient eulogium: See how these Christians love one another, into the condemning testimony: See how these Christians hate one another. It is our presumptuously declaring that to be common, which God has cleansed, which has arrayed the different parts of the Church against each other. There is such a thing as a faithful adherence to the truth, without anathematizing all who differ from us.[14]

This is not theological compromise—it is theological integrity with spiritual maturity.

At the conclusion of his discussion on Presbyterian liberality, Smyth delivered this thunderous rebuke to all sectarian arrogance:

> Thrust not yourselves into a corner of the church, and there stand quarreling against the rest; make not sectaries of yourselves by appropriating Christ, and the church, and salvation to your party; abhor the very thoughts and name of any universal church of Christ, which is of narrower extent than Christianity, and

---

[13] Thomas Smyth, *"The Fundamental Doctrines of Christianity: The True and Only Required Basis of Charity and United Christian Effort"*, address delivered at Philadelphia, on the twenty-second anniversary of the American Sunday-School Union, May 17, 1846 (Philadelphia: American Sunday-School Union, 1846), 29. "The apostle, therefore, charges those as bringing in another gospel, and as troublers of the churches, who made anything more than faith in Christ essential to Christian character and communion, and there is truth in the conclusion, if not in the criticism, of Coleridge, when he derives the term heresy . . . from a verb, which gives it the signification of lifting up some opinion, even if in its place it be true, into improper elevation, and undue importance; that is, making fundamental to salvation what may only be of minor or relative importance" (*ibid.*, 30).

[14] Hodge, *Discussions in Church Polity*, 224.

> containeth fewer than all true Christians, and is pretended to be confined to a sect.[15]

This is the beating heart of Old School Presbyterianism: a deep, principled hostility to sectarianism, born not of liberalism, but of love for Christ's Church. Their wide catholicity was not in spite of their orthodoxy—it was demanded by it.

What's Ahead

We have now seen that the Old School Presbyterians not only affirmed wide catholicity but fiercely opposed sectarianism. But why? What was their scriptural foundation? That is the question we will explore in the next three chapters.

[15] "It is not the papists that are the catholic church, nor is it the Greeks, no, nor the protestants, much less the new prelates alone; but it is all Christians through the world, of whom the protestants are the soundest part, but not the whole" (Smyth, *Works* 3: 169).

CHAPTER FIVE

Wide Catholicity Based on Belief in Fundamental Doctrines

One reason the Old School Presbyterians embraced wide catholicity was their conviction that some doctrines were essential to salvation while others, though important, were not. They recognized a broad Christian unity among all who held to the fundamentals of the faith. Even though they demanded a high degree of doctrinal conformity from their ministers, they still maintained spiritual camaraderie with all who, as Dabney put it, embrace "the fundamental and necessary points" of doctrine, "although they do not receive sundry truths which we are assured God has revealed."[1]

In making this distinction between fundamental and important doctrines, the Old School believed they were not innovating but simply aligning themselves with the broader Reformed tradition. Thomas Smyth appealed to Jean-Alphonse Turretin, who compiled 150 pages of quotations from the Reformed tradition affirming this distinction.[2]

The younger Turretin could easily have cited his own father, Francis Turretin, whose *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* was used as a standard textbook by major Old School figures like Charles Hodge and Robert Lewis Dabney. In the 14th question of his first topic, he asked, "Are some theological topics fundamental, others not, and how can they be mutually distinguished?"[3] Francis argued forcefully against those who erred by excess—such as the "more strict Lutherans who (to render a union with us more difficult) extend fundamentals more widely than is just, turn almost every error into a heresy and make necessary those things which are indifferent so as more easily to prove that we differ on fundamentals."[4] He also opposed those on the opposite extreme. There

---

[1] Robert Lewis Dabney, "Broad Churchism," in *Discussions: Evangelical*, vol. 2, ed. C. R. Vaughan (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1890), 449.

[2] Cited in Thomas Smyth, *"The Fundamental Doctrines of Christianity: The True and Only Required Basis of Charity and United Christian Effort"*, address delivered at Philadelphia, on the twenty-second anniversary of the American Sunday-School Union, May 17, 1846 (Philadelphia: American Sunday-School Union, 1846), 14.

[3] Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger, 3 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992–1997), 1:48.

[4] *Ibid.*

were also those who erred in defect who "take away from fundamentals the principal doctrines of the faith."[5] While affirming that all revealed truth is "necessary" in its own way, he insisted it is not all equally necessary.[6] The Reformed theologians held to a middle way, Turretin said, and while "they necessarily build upon some fundamentals . . . they neither restrict them too closely, nor extend them too far."[7]

Turretin then listed the doctrines that constitute the fundamentals of the faith—a list that would be echoed by Old School Presbyterians:

> But they all agree in these fundamental articles: the doctrine concerning the sacred Scriptures as inspired, being the only and perfect rule of faith; concerning the unity of God and the Trinity; concerning Christ, the Redeemer, and his most perfect satisfaction; concerning sin and its penalty–death; concerning the law and its inability to save; concerning justification by faith; concerning the necessity of grace and of good works, sanctification and the worship of God, the church, the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment and eternal life and such as are connected with these. All these are so strictly joined together that they mutually depend upon each other. One cannot be withdrawn without overthrowing all the rest.[8]

This summary closely reflects the Old School Presbyterian understanding of what constitutes the essential doctrines.

To better understand how this distinction supported their wide catholicity, we turn to Thomas Smyth's address, "The Fundamental Doctrines of Christianity, the True and Only Required Basis of Charity and United Christian Effort." This address, delivered at the 22nd anniversary of the American Sunday School Union—a cooperative venture of multiple denominations—underscored his conviction that unity could only be built upon shared essentials, not uniformity in all things.

Smyth, who had spent much of his life defending Presbyterian ecclesiology, emphasized that true unity comes through open discussion of differing beliefs, not by suppressing them. In his writings, he avoided all "arrogant and exclusive assumptions" and sought "to show how sincerely and scripturally denominational views may be maintained." At the same time, he insisted that "all who hold the Head are required to acknowledge, and to bear with one another in love." His aim was not only to defend the

---

[5] Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:48.

[6] "All truths are not of the same weight" (*ibid.*, 1:49). Thomas Smyth wrote, "Truth is all-important, but all truth is not equally important. And while truth is essential to Christian character and hope, so also are charity, and peace, and union, essential to the Christian character both of individuals and of churches ; and to make anything, therefore, however true or even important it may be in itself, but which is not essential to personal salvation, an excuse for the failure of these things, is to turn the truth of God into a lie" (*The Fundamental Doctrines*, 29).

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:53.

truth but to model the right spirit in declaring it. In this way, "I have hoped to contribute my feeble aid towards the diffusion of such a spirit and such a practice."[9]

Smyth grounded his argument in Philippians 3:15–16: "Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded: and if in anything ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you. Nevertheless, whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing." This passage, he argued, showed that some differences in belief should not become grounds for division. "They are not to militate against the exercise of Christian charity, but are, on the contrary, to constitute the very basis upon which that charity is to be exercised, since charity presupposes opinions and practices which require forbearance and mutual toleration." It is precisely in loving others despite differences that charity is best expressed. And the result? Spiritual maturity: "And it is by the exercise of this charity, as the apostle teaches, we may expect that the Spirit of God will lead us to that more perfect unity of sentiment towards which we should aspire, and for which we should pray."[10]

This distinction, Smyth argued, not only encouraged spiritual growth but also clarified which doctrines were essential. "Some truths, therefore, are useful; but others are essential."[11] While all revealed truths are profitable and should be "embraced when known," they are not of equal value: "there is a great difference in the intrinsic and relative value of these truths."[12] Deliberately rejecting known truth is incompatible with salvation, but this does not make all truths equally essential. "The conclusion, therefore, is irresistible, that while all divine revelation is true . . . still all the truths contained in the word of God are not necessary to be known, either for their own sake, or in order to salvation." These less essential truths are nonetheless gifts for "our correction, instruction, and reproof," allowing us to benefit from diverse insights into God's wisdom.[13]

Smyth saw this distinction as biblical, but also confessional. He cited *Westminster Confession* 1.7:

> All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.

These "necessary" truths—the fundamental doctrines—are clear and accessible to all, even the unlearned.

---

[9] Smyth, *The Fundamental Doctrines*, 8.
[10] *Ibid*., 4.
[11] *Ibid.,* 10.
[12] *Ibid.*
[13] *Ibid.,* 12.

Smyth further defined these fundamental doctrines as those dealing with the way of salvation, or as he put it, the "nature, objects, and grounds of faith."[14] He illustrated this distinction with a helpful analogy:

> It is one thing to ask, "How was this glorious scheme devised and perfected, and what is its comprehensive plan?" and another to ask, "What must I do to be saved?" The answer to these two questions must be altogether as different as would be the answers to the question, "How came I to exist, and how am I constituted?" and to the question, "How am I to act so as to enjoy and to perpetuate this life?"[15]

He concluded, "The one relates to the science, and the other to the way of salvation."[16]

Smyth also emphasized that disagreements about church government fall outside the realm of fundamental doctrine. "Many things are necessary for the organization of the visible body that are not necessary to explain the scheme of salvation."[17] A person could be "a good theologian, and a good Christian," yet still "a very defective churchman." The reason? "Other things are necessary to the organization of a church of Christ than those truths which lie at the foundation of the scheme of redemption, and the enjoyment of salvation."[18] Ecclesiastical differences, then, did not undermine shared salvation.

So, what were the doctrines Smyth considered essential? His list closely resembled Turretin's:

> It is manifest that the person, character, atonement, righteousness, death and intercession of Christ, and the person, character and offices of that divine Spirit "without whom no man can call Jesus Lord," constitute the essence, the foundation, and the very life and power of Christianity; and that fundamental

---

[14] *Ibid.,* 17. In *ibid.,* he says, "Fundamental doctrines are such as affect the vitals of Christianity; such as are frequently and plainly enforced in Scripture or plainly inferable from its enforcements; such, especially, as are presented in Scripture, when the way of salvation, and the nature, objects and grounds of faith are pointed and such as will be found to lie at the foundation of the Christian experience of the great body of believers."

[15] *Ibid*., 19.

[16] *Ibid*., 20. He also says, "And while all truth is necessary in giving a full view of the origin, history, nature, and plan of redemption, and it is the duty or privilege at least of every church to hold forth and confess all those truths which are believed to be most necessary and important to be known and to be taught in order to the perfection that is in Christ Jesus, yet there are comparatively few truths which are absolutely essential to be known and received in the love of them, in order that 'we may know that we are of the truth, assure our hearts before God,' and enjoy the witnessing of 'the Spirit with our spirit that we are the children of God'" (*ibid.,* 31).

[17] *Ibid.,* 23.

[18] *Ibid.* Elsewhere, Smyth says, "There is, in all these teachings, a careful and manifest distinction made between the essentials of a church, and those things which are valuable, so far as they sustain and carry out those essentials, but which, in themselves considered, are not fundamental" (*Complete Works of Rev. Thomas Smyth, D.D.*, vol. 3 [Boston: Crocker & Brewster, 1908], 146).

> truth and error must therefore be determined by their relation to these great doctrines.[19]

In short, "what is necessary to salvation is, in short, to know how a sinner, as such, can be justified from all sin, sanctified from all pollution, and made a partaker of everlasting life."[20] *The Westminster Confession* expresses this in its definition of the "principal acts of saving faith": "accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace."[21]

Two additional witnesses confirm this distinction. Charles Hodge acknowledged that Christian unity was imperfect, but still real: "It is far greater than would be inferred from the contentions of theologians, and it includes everything essential to Christianity."[22] Thomas E. Peck, drawing on Philip Schaff's *Creeds of Christendom*, said:

> [T]his collection of creeds cannot fail to impress us with the differences which exist among Christians upon certain points of faith, it must impress us also with the real consensus of the Evangelical Churches upon others, and the most important. He who will take the pains to examine the creeds of these churches will find evidence enough that they have not only been governed by the same external standard, the Word of God, but that they have been led also by the same Spirit.[23]

Thus, the creeds themselves testify to a deep doctrinal unity across evangelical churches.

Dabney captured the Old School position with characteristic clarity: "In enforcing upon church teachers and rulers the sacred obligations of strict orthodoxy, Presbyterians fully admit that some doctrines of the Christian system are not fundamental to salvation."[24] This distinction grounded their wide catholicity. "We accordingly gladly receive into the body of Christ's church catholic, and into the

---

[19] Smyth, *The Fundamental Doctrines*, 18. Here is Hodge's list: "That there is one God ; that the Godhead subsists in three persons, the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost ; that the Eternal Son of God assumed our nature, was born of a woman, and suffered and died for our salvation; that He is the only Saviour of that it is through his merit and grace men are delivered from the condemnation and power of sin ; that all men being sinners, need this salvation ; that it is only through the power of the Holy Ghost sinners are made partakers of the redemption of Christ ; that those who experience this renewing of the Holy Ghost and are united to Christ, and they only, are made partakers of eternal life these are doctrines which enter into the faith of all Christian Churches, and of all true believers" (*Discussions in Church Polity* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1878], 90).

[20] Smyth, *The Fundamental Doctrines*, 25. He cites Johann Friedrich Stapfer, *Institutiones Theologiae Polemicae Universae, ordine scientifico dispositae*, tomus 5 (Zürich: Heidegger & Socios, 1757), 538.

[21] *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, 14.2.

[22] Hodge, *Discussion in Church Polity*, 90.

[23] Thomas E. Peck, "The Creeds of Christendom," *Southern Presbyterian Review* 29, no. 2 (April 1878):218.

[24] Dabney, "Broach Churchism," 449

communion of saints, all such persons, although they do not receive sundry truths which we are assured God has revealed."[25] In other words, all who embraced the essential doctrines of the gospel were regarded not only as church members—but as saints in full communion. They were united to Christ and so to each other. It is to this teaching on the church's spiritual union with Christ and one another that we now turn.

[25] *Ibid*. A great example of how this works out is in his article "The Moral Effects of a Free Justification" in *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, ed. C. R. Vaughan, vol. 1 (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1890), 73–106.

CHAPTER SIX

Wide Catholicity Based on the Church's Spiritual Union

It is crucial to understand that for the Old School Presbyterians, the distinction between fundamental and other important doctrines was not merely an abstract intellectual framework imposed upon reality. It was not a mental exercise reserved for theologians. Rather, it was grounded in a vital, living spiritual union with Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit—a union that actually and objectively exists and that truly unites all believers to one another. Unity was not something to be engineered from the outside. It already existed by virtue of union with Christ. As Thomas Smyth expressed it with piercing clarity: "In spite of ourselves, we are united—united whether we will or not. If we are one in Christ, we must be one—we cannot help it."[1] The wide catholicity of the Old School Presbyterians was not a novelty. It was a practical effort to embody and display this inward unity—without ever compromising strict orthodoxy.

Why did they believe in this spiritual union? What justified their confidence in it despite serious external differences among Christians? The answer was doctrinal: this unity was an article of faith, inseparable from their understanding of salvation itself. The church, according to Scripture, was not merely a visible institution but a spiritual organism. As Dabney put it, "[The] Scriptures . . . do beyond dispute teach us that the invisible and spiritual church of Christ is one, 'even as he and the Father are one'; that it is his body; his spouse and bride; catholic; i.e., the fullness of him that filleth all in that it is holy; that it is indefectible . . ."[2] Their conclusion was clear: the church, in its truest sense, was one with Christ—and that union included all true believers. When the Old School Presbyterians sought unity, they were looking for a greater manifestation of this deep connection, not a mere organizational unity.

In fact, Dabney saw grave danger in reversing the order of organizational unity and spiritual unity. Many, he warned, misapplied such Scripture passages that speak of

---

[1] Thomas Smyth, *"The Fundamental Doctrines of Christianity: The True and Only Required Basis of Charity and United Christian Effort"*, address delivered at Philadelphia, on the twenty-second anniversary of the American Sunday-School Union, May 17, 1846 (Philadelphia: American Sunday-School Union, 1846), 27.

[2] Robert L. Dabney, "What Is Christian Union?" in *Discussions: Evangelicall*, ed. C. R. Vaughan, vol. 2 (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1891), 433.

the universal communion of the people of God united to Christ by the Spirit as referring to the visible ecclesiastical organizations. The result was disastrous: ". . . all these Scriptures were quoted as though they applied to one organized, visible body of believers, and thence were drawn the tremendous and false consequences of the damning sin of all formal diversity, the necessity of outward conformity, the propriety of pains and penalties to enforce it. Search and see!"[3] For the Old School, the failure to distinguish between the invisible spiritual church and the visible organization led to tyranny and error. The Old School Presbyterians insisted that unity must begin in the heart—rooted in Christ—and only then work its way outward in visible forms.

Charles Hodge reinforced this principle repeatedly in *Discussions on Church Polity*. For Hodge, the foundation of all true union was the spiritual bond between Christ and His people:

> That communion may be in faith, in love, in obedience to a common Lord. It may have its origin in something deeper still; in the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, even the Spirit of Christ, by which every member is united to Christ, and all the members are joined in one body. This is an union far more real, a communion far more intimate, than subsists between the members of any visible society as such.[4]

This echoed Dabney's view: the heart of unity is spiritual.

Hodge emphasized that the visible organization was subordinated to this spiritual union: "The Church, as such, is not a visible society. All visible union, all external organization, may cease, and yet, so long as there are saints who have communion, the Church exists, if the Church is the communion of saints."[5] The church is manifest wherever believers demonstrate love, faith, and spiritual communion through the Holy Spirit. It is manifest wherever believers—individually or corporately—recognize one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, regardless of their organizational affiliation.

This doctrine carried moral weight. If all Christians are spiritually united in Christ, then they are bound to live in accordance with that unity. "It extends therefore to all Christians without distinction of nation, or culture, or ecclesiastical association. It leads not only to acts of kindness, but to religious fellowship. It expresses itself in the open and cordial recognition of every Christian as a Christian, and treating him accordingly."[6] This invisible communion created a visible obligation. When one encountered another believer—whether individually or in a different church—one owed them a heartfelt embrace as a fellow member of Christ. That was the lived catholicity of the Old School.

---

[3] *Ibid.*
[4] Charles Hodge, *Discussion in Church Polity* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1878), 6.
[5] *Ibid.*
[6] *Ibid.,* 91.

This vision was not ecclesiastical theory—it was rooted in the Old School's very understanding of the Gospel. Hodge made this connection explicit: "The Church as an outward organization is the result and expression of an inward spiritual life; and consequently must take its form from the nature of the life whence it springs."[7] Anyone united to Christ by faith had that life and thus belonged to the Church. Hodge drove it home: "This is only saying, in other words, that our theory of the Church, depends on our theory of doctrine. If we hold a particular system of doctrine, we must hold a corresponding theory of the Church. The two are so intimately connected that they cannot be separated . . ."[8] That's why the Reformed confessions—whether explicitly or implicitly—made the distinction between the visible and invisible church. It was not optional. It was demanded by the Gospel itself. If all who believe in Jesus are united to Him by the Spirit, then they are united to one another. That demands wide catholicity.

Charles' son, Archibald Alexander Hodge, would later affirm the same principle. Writing on Christian union, he upheld the consensus Reformed view that the "principle of union is spiritual and vital."[9] Organization could express this union but was never its source. He explained:

> The Church of Christ necessarily tends to self-organization under ordinary conditions, and to different forms of organization under different conditions, nevertheless organization itself is not of its essence. The Church exists antecedently to and independently of any organization, and its far larger part, embracing all mankind of all centuries dying in infancy, extends indefinitely beyond all organizations. All the more it is certain that no special form can be essential to the existence or to the integrity of the Church.[10]

The Church existed long before—and often apart from—visible structures. It never existed apart from union with Christ. This excluded the idea that any one form of visible organization could claim to be *the* church. But it also meant that wherever the marks of spiritual union appeared, catholicity was required.

Edward Morris built on this insight, affirming that this "vital, spiritual union" was what allowed Christians to recognize the church wherever it appeared. In *The Supernatural Church of God*, he wrote:

> But wherever seen or studied, it may be instantly known as the one Holy and Catholic Church by these tests; an inspired Word, a spiritual Life, an indwelling Holy Ghost, an accepted, revered, enthroned Redeemer. Whatever names or characteristics it bears, in whatever land or age it may appear, these are the

---

[7] *Ibid.* 38–39.
[8] *Ibid.,* 38.
[9] A.A. Hodge, "Open Letters," *The Century Magazine* 31, no. 5 (March 1886):799.
[10] *Ibid.*

> marks by which the true church may be known–these are the celestial signs by which it lives and conquers.[11]

Wherever these signs were present—regardless of name, nation, or ecclesiastical form—the Church was present. Thus, a wide catholicity was not optional. It was demanded by the very nature of the Church.

Morris observed that Presbyterians had long viewed themselves as champions of this kind of catholicity. In his essay, "The Catholic Elements of Presbyterianism," he asked: "To what extent may it be properly affirmed that Presbyterianism, though a strong and positive, is also a tolerant and catholic type of the common Christianity?"[12] Turning to the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, he answered: deeply so. Morris acknowledged that Presbyterian history included failures to live up to this vision. The richness of the system could tempt some toward narrowness. But the theological foundation remained. He insisted:

> As the doctrine of the Church, as one and universal, flows directly out of the doctrine of the Holy Ghost, so the affirmation of the Confession concerning the fellowship of believers, like that of the Apostolic Creed, is directly consequent upon its teaching respecting the one Church of Christ on earth. If that Church be ONE, then it follows, inevitably, that all saints, being united first to their Lord by faith, and having fellowship with Him, are also united to one another in love . . ."[13]

A shared union with Christ demanded mutual communion and duties of love.

This wide catholicity, Morris argued, is most clearly expressed in *Westminster Confession* Chapter 26, "On the Communion of Saints." It says that "all saints, that are united to Jesus Christ their Head, by his Spirit, and by faith, have fellowship with him in his graces, sufferings, death, resurrection, and glory: and, being united to one another in love, . . . have communion in each other's gifts and grace." This meant that they are "bound to maintain an holy fellowship and communion in the worship of God, and in performing such other spiritual services as tend to their mutual edification" (26.1). And, critically: "Which communion, as God offereth opportunity, is to be extended unto all those who, in every place, call upon the name of the Lord Jesus" (26.2). This was the blueprint for Old School Presbyterian wide catholicity. They did not merely affirm it—they practiced it.

---

[11] Edward D. Morris, "The Supernatural Quality of the Church of God," *The Christian World* 19, no. 12 (December 1868): 395.

[12] Edward D. Morris, "Catholic Elements in Presbyterianism," *The Princeton Review* 54, no. 16 (January–June 1878): 100.

[13] *Ibid.,* 107.

To Morris, this chapter was Westminster's most powerful expression of catholicity. He wrote: "Such is the Westminster doctrine as to the Communion of Saints—the most full, the most elaborate, the most practical and precious statement on this subject to be found in the entire series of Protestant symbols. It is an utterance from the very heart of Christianity, fragrant with the spirit of Jesus."[14] Even those who might question Morris' historical evaluation of the Assembly could not deny the clarity of the doctrine. In fact, he concluded that this view was so strong that: "Presbyterians who are differentiated from their brethren by cherished but non-essential peculiarities of any kind, are yet compelled, by their loyalty to the common system, to hold such peculiarities in reserve, and not only to tolerate, but also to respect all who rally with them around the one catholic banner."[15] The Westminster doctrine of the Church not only demanded wide catholicity, it shaped all who held it.

In sum, the second foundational doctrine undergirding the wide catholicity of Old School Presbyterianism was their doctrine of the Church as a "vital, spiritual union." This union did not merely call believers to unity—it compelled them toward it with divine force. To repeat Smyth once more: "In spite of ourselves, we are united—united whether we will or not. If we are one in Christ, we must be one—we cannot help it."[16]

When it comes to wide catholicity, there is one passage in particular that drove all this home. We turn next to their interpretation of Romans 14:1–15:13.

[14] *Ibid*., 108.
[15] *Ibid.,* 123.
[16] Thomas Smyth, *The Fundamental Doctrines*, 27.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Wide Catholicity Expressed in Romans 14-15

The book of Romans holds pride of place in Protestant theology—and especially among Presbyterians. Because Romans is so rich, it can be easy to overlook the latter chapters. Yet Romans 12:1–15:13 is no mere appendix. It unfolds the practical consequences of the Gospel: first in relation to the world (12–13), then in relation to the church (14–15:13). The Old School Presbyterians did not bypass this section. On the contrary, Romans 14–15:13 became a cornerstone of their ecclesiology—particularly their insistence on a wide catholicity that upheld, rather than diluted, strict orthodoxy.

One verse in particular shaped their thinking: Romans 15:7—"Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God." The implications of this text are profound: if Christ has received someone, then we must receive them. Thomas Smyth drove the point home in his address to the American Sunday School Union: "And that which gives evidence that a man has been received by Christ, must be sufficient evidence to all who are Christ's, 'to receive him, as Christ also hath received him, to the glory of God.'"[1] And his denunciation of failure in this regard was unflinching: "To claim to be united to Christ, therefore, as a church or as an individual, and to refuse to hold Christian communion with those whom we are bound to confess Christ has received, is either wickedness, impiety, pharasaic, self-righteous pride, or preposterous folly."[2] The Old School Presbyterians took such warnings seriously—and reserved some of their strongest rebukes for those who undermined catholicity.

Charles Hodge similarly leaned on Romans 15:7 in his *Discussions on Church Polity*, using it to articulate the principle that defined their church practice: "Plainly, this is the view of Scripture," he wrote. "The doctrine so plainly taught in our standards, that Christian fellowship should be extended to all who exhibit the Christian character,

---

[1] Thomas Smyth, *"The Fundamental Doctrines of Christianity: The True and Only Required Basis of Charity and United Christian Effort"*, address delivered at Philadelphia, on the twenty-second anniversary of the American Sunday-School Union, May 17, 1846 (Philadelphia: American Sunday-School Union, 1846), 26

[2] *Ibid.*

is no less plainly taught in the word of God. We are there commanded to receive all those whom God has received."[3] He continued,

> What that evidence is, is recorded in the word of God, and every man and every Church must apply it upon their own responsibility. One thing, however, is plain, viz.: that we are bound to receive all those whom God has received; and are forbidden to require more for communion with us, than he requires for communion with him.[4]

This clarity—this refusal to add human tests to divine reception—formed the backbone of their approach.

Hodge reiterated this same conviction in his commentary on Romans. On Romans 14:1–2, he wrote: "The fellowship of the saints is not to be broken for unessential matters; in other words, we have no right to make anything a condition of Christian communion which is compatible with piety."[5] And he summarized Romans 15:7 bluntly: "If God has received him, we should receive him."[6]

This wasn't a casual suggestion. It was a command. And it continued throughout Hodge's commentary. In Romans 14:4–10, recall that he pressed the point further, condemning the censorious spirit that so often infects religious communities:

> A denunciatory or censorious spirit is hostile to the spirit of the gospel. It is an encroachment on the prerogatives of the only Judge of the heart and conscience: it blinds the mind to moral distinctions, and prevents the discernment between matters unessential and those vitally important; and it leads us to forget our own accountableness, and to overlook our own faults, in our zeal to denounce those of others, Romans 14:4–10.[7]

In other words, wide catholicity was not merely tolerated by the gospel—it was demanded by it. And censoriousness was not merely unfortunate—it was a rebellion against the gospel's spirit.

In Romans 14:1–12, Hodge summarized the entire section with unmistakable force:

> Paul evidently argues on the principle that if a man is a true Christian, he should be recognized and treated as such. Christians should not allow anything to alienate them from their brethren, who afford credible evidence that they are the

---

[3] Charles Hodge, *Discussion in Church Polity* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1878), 222.
[4] I*bid.,* 223.
[5] Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1873), 674.
[6] *Ibid.*
[7] *Ibid*., 676.

> servants of God. Owing to ignorance, early prejudice, weakness of faith, and other causes, there may and must exist a diversity of opinion and practice on minor points of duty. But this diversity is no sufficient reason for rejecting from Christian fellowship any member of the family of Christ. It is, however, one thing to recognize a man as a Christian, and another to recognize him as a suitable minister of a church, organized on a particular form of government and system of doctrines, Romans 14:1–12.[8]

That distinction is crucial: all true Christians are to be received as brethren, but churches have the right—and the responsibility—to require full agreement for the ministry of Word and sacrament within their own confessional boundaries.

Hodge further explained this in his discussion of Romans 14:17–18: "As the religion of the gospel consists in the inward graces of the Holy Spirit, all who have these graces should be recognized as genuine Christians; being acceptable to God, they should be loved and cherished by his people, notwithstanding their weakness or errors."[9] The church's unity is grounded not in organizational machinery, but in spiritual union with Christ. That union is real, and it obligates us to act accordingly. Those in Christ "should be loved and cherished."[10]

He returned to the theme once more on Romans 15:7: "Those are to be received and treated as Christians whom Christ himself has received. Men have no right to make terms of communion which Christ has not made."[11] The clarity and consistency of Hodge's application of this text is unmistakable. Romans 15:7 was not a footnote to their ecclesiology—it was a foundation stone.

William Plumer, in his commentary on Romans, drove the same point home. Commenting on this passage, he wrote: "So long as there are different Christian denominations in the world, let the members of each set an example of courtesy, liberality, brotherly kindness and charity."[12] He then quoted Philip Doddridge:

> Let all the different sects and parties of Christians study to imbibe more of the equitable and lovely temper which the apostle here expresses in so genuine a manner. The divisions of the church are not to be healed by imposing our own sentiments, phrases and forms, and censuring and harassing those that will not acquiesce in them. Such a temper will only engender strife, and mutual provocations will produce mutual increasing resentment.[13]

---

[8] *Ibid.,* 674.
[9] *Ibid.,* 678.
[10] *Ibid.*
[11] *Ibid.,* 700.
[12] William Swan Plumer, *Commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1870), 611.
[13] *Ibid.*

In short, the Old School Presbyterian reading of Romans 14–15 laid the theological groundwork for practicing a wide catholicity—a catholicity not based on enforced visible union, but on the recognition of real, spiritual unity in Christ. Churches must rightly examine those who would serve in the ministry, but they must do so in the spirit of Romans 15:7: receiving all those whom Christ has received.

Conclusion on the Why of Wide Catholicity

The Old School Presbyterians' wide catholicity rested on deep and weighty theological convictions. It was grounded in the vital distinction between fundamental doctrines—those essential to salvation—and other important but non-essential teachings of Scripture. They insisted on preserving the simplicity of the Gospel as the basis of salvation, and they affirmed that all who embraced this Gospel were united in a real, vital, spiritual union with Christ and with one another. This spiritual unity was not merely theoretical—it demanded love, fellowship, and mutual reception among believers.

This was not a vague ecumenism. It was rooted in Scripture—above all, in Romans 14–15. For the Old School, these chapters were not secondary; they were central to the doctrine and practice of the church. The theological foundation and the wide catholicity that flowed from it were mutually reinforcing in both their theology and their ecclesial practice.

But doesn't strict orthodoxy undermine this catholicity? Doesn't it contradict the very principles just affirmed? The Old School Presbyterians answered decisively: No. On the contrary, they believed that strict orthodoxy was essential—not only to safeguard the full counsel of God, but also to advance the true unity of the church. How? They believed it provided clarity, stability, and integrity within the visible church, without denying fellowship to those united in Christ. In the next two chapters, we will examine how they believed this orthodoxy could actually serve the church's unity and what means they prescribed to manifest that unity more fully.

CHAPTER EIGHT

How Strict Orthodoxy Squared with Wide Catholicity

Robert Lewis Dabney stated plainly that Presbyterian churches "uniformly receive private or lay members to the full communion of our own branch of the church who profess only the primary rudiments of the faith."[1] But when it came to teachers and rulers in the church, they required strict orthodoxy—even in doctrines not essential to salvation—because the standards for teaching were higher: "the sacred obligations of strict orthodoxy" applied even to those biblical doctrines that were "not fundamental to salvation."[2]

Why? Because, as Dabney explained, Scripture demands far more of ministers than of lay members. He wrote:

> The minister of Christ is "a steward of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required in stewards that a man be found faithful." (1 Cor. 4:1–2.) The heterodox teacher "who consents not to wholesome words, the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness, is proud, knowing nothing, but doting," etc. (1 Tim. 6:3–4.) The minister must be "a workman approved unto God, rightly dividing the word of truth." (2 Tim. 2:15.) Timothy must "continue in the things which he had learned and been assured of, knowing of whom he learned them." (2 Tim. 3:14.) Titus must "show in doctrine uncorruptness, gravity, sincerity, sound speech that cannot be condemned." (Titus 2:7–8).[3]

This is a far cry from the basic profession of faith expected from members. The call to teach demanded doctrinal precision.

---

[1] Robert Lewis Dabney, "Broad Churchism," in *Discussions: Evangelical*, vol. 2, ed. C. R. Vaughan (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1890), 450.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] *Ibid.*, 449.

We do not need to dwell long on this well-established fact of Old School Presbyterianism. Their strict orthodoxy is widely recognized. What is less known—and what this book aims to highlight—is the breadth of their wide catholicity.

What needs explanation is how the Old School could believe that holding firm to strict orthodoxy in their own communion actually *advanced* the unity of the church more effectively than merging into a single denomination with those with whom they had serious doctrinal disagreements. How could maintaining separate denominations promote, rather than hinder, Christian unity?

The Old School's ecclesiastical experience helps illuminate the answer. The Old School believed that New School theology deviated from the Westminster Standards and that many who embraced Congregationalist polity were calling themselves Presbyterian. A denomination that allowed these differences threatened to swallow up testimony to truths Presbyterians had long considered important. As a result, the Assembly of 1837 abrogated the 1801 Plan of Union that had brought many of these churches together and expelled many of the churches were these differences existed.

These differences, when forced into one denomination, had generated friction and strife. As the 1837 Assembly observed in its letter to its own churches, "What are called the Old School and New School parties are already separated in fact; in almost every part of our country where those parties exist, they have less ministerial or Christian communion with one another than either of those parties have with Christians of other denominations."[4] The problem wasn't theological diversity *per se*—it was forced organizational unity that ignored real doctrinal and ecclesiological differences. Their firm hope was that fraternal fellowship would be restored by being in different denominations. As stated in its letter to all churches, "We cannot wisely attempt, with our different views and feelings, to inhabit the same house; but, as neighbours, we may be on the most amicable and even affectionate terms. We wish for no more than to be allowed the fair and unimpeded action of our own ecclesiastical principles."[5] In that way, being in different denominations would reduce the strife they had experienced and allow them to have a more Christlike spirit towards one another.

Thus, the Old School realized the choice was not unity versus disunity in the abstract. The real choice was between a false, enforced unity—where differences were suppressed or sparked endless controversy—and a respectful diversity in distinct churches, where differences were acknowledged, peace preserved, and truth more fully proclaimed. As Dabney put it, "A church, whose teachers are not heartily agreed in doctrine, can only have peace within itself at the cost of a Sadducean indifference to truth."[6]

---

[4] "Pastoral Letter to the Churches under the Care of the General Assembly," in Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (Philadelphia: Lydia R. Bailey, 1837), 499.

[5] "Circular Letter," in *ibid.*, 506.

[6] Dabney, "Broad Churchism," 459.

Thomas E. Peck, in his review of Schaff's *The Creeds of Christendom*, drew the same conclusion. Schaff's work, he said, displayed both the real doctrinal differences among evangelicals and "the real consensus of the Evangelical Churches" on what mattered most. There was, Peck said, *more unity* among the branches of the Reformed family than within the single body of Rome—especially regarding "the fundamental point, the way of salvation."[7] Rome could not preserve true unity despite her institutional oneness. Therefore, Peck urged, "no further attempt [should] be made to disturb the true consensus of the Reformed Churches, by forcing a union which must be more or less insincere."[8] The better path was "the recognition of one Evangelical Church by another as a true Church of Jesus Christ."[9]

Smyth was even more direct. Attempts to force union, he warned, had "invariably resulted in the production of divisions instead of union, of jealousy instead of affection, of hatred instead of love . . ." In such environments, minor matters become flashpoints, and "a disproportionate and unchristian zeal for things of minor importance" arises, eclipsing what truly matters. The outcome, Smyth warned, was often "hypocrisy in profession and laxity in practice."[10] The result was always one of two evils: war or indifference.

Dabney explained the root of this reality. The early church had an advantage modern churches lack: infallible teachers. That age is over. He wrote:

> But now that the Spirit of infallible revelation is confessedly withdrawn from the church, and God has seen fit to leave Christendom to the guidance of the Bible alone, enjoining at the same time sincerity of conviction and a sacred respect for the spiritual liberty of every soul from every authority in divine things save his own, how inevitable, how obvious, is it that a diversity in unity must emerge and must be tolerated?[11]

In other words, without an infallible human arbiter, unity must be more *spiritual* than organizational. "Sincerity of conviction" and "spiritual liberty" demand that denominational distinctions be maintained where real differences exist.

Thus, separate visible churches and denominations were not unfortunate—they were *necessary*. They were the lesser of two unavoidable evils: either forced unity and ensuing conflict, or honest division and peace. As Dabney put it:

---

[7] Thomas E. Peck, "The Creeds of Christendom," *Southern Presbyterian Review* 29, no. 2 (April 1878): 218.

[8] *Ibid*., 219.

[9] *Ibid*., 220.

[10] Thomas Smyth, *"The Fundamental Doctrines of Christianity: The True and Only Required Basis of Charity and United Christian Effort"*, address delivered at Philadelphia, on the twenty-second anniversary of the American Sunday-School Union, May 17, 1846 (Philadelphia: American Sunday-School Union, 1846), 7.

[11] Robert L. Dabney, "What Is Christian Union?" in *Discussions: Evangelical*, ed. C. R. Vaughan, vol. 2 (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1891), 433.

> Does it necessarily follow hence that there will be several denominations of Christians within the church catholic, limiting partially its external unity? We answer, so be it; it is the smaller of the unavoidable evils, unless all human minds which imbibe any Christian truth can be rendered infallible, or unless the right of private judgment be destroyed, or else unless an inspired umpire in doctrinal differences can be found on earth. The position of the pope is a very expressive avowal of this conclusion, for in attempting to exact of all Christians a formal unity he professes infallibility.[12]

The Roman Catholic Church, in claiming to preserve visible unity, did so only by assuming the role of an infallible judge. Protestant churches, denying that such a judge exists, must instead honor diversity in faithful conviction.

Charles Hodge affirmed the same. "When men differ," he wrote, "it is better to avow their diversity of opinion or faith, than to pretend to agree, or to force discordant elements in a formal uncongenial union."[13] Thus, multiple denominations were not a threat to catholicity—they were its protection. They allowed for honest disagreements without sacrificing love, and they preserved both truth and fellowship. As Dabney wrote, "The more they approximate the Bible standard, the more will they approach each other, not only in community of faith and love, but even in outward form." In the meantime, "their separate existence beside each other does not mar the catholicity of the visible church as one whole, but is the inevitable and designed result" of geography, human weakness, and even redeemed prejudice. These weaknesses are not "justifiable," Dabney said, but "will assuredly continue to operate as long as man's nature is only partially sanctified."[14]

Such visible division was to be lamented in one sense, but not at the expense of internal, spiritual unity. As Thomas Peck wrote, "The unity of Evangelical Churches . . . is the unity of life. It is the unity of a living organism, not only admitting, but requiring, diversity."[15] (519). A unity that ignores truth is a unity not worth having.

This did not rule out all forms of visible cooperation. As Howard Crosby noted, "The truth is that Christians cannot be made to agree [on secondary doctrines or forms of church government], nor is it desirable that they should be." But they *do* agree on what matters most: "Christ's divinity, incarnation, the sacrifice for sin, the gift of the Spirit, faith, repentance, the new life . . ." On these, Crosby insisted, "Christians of all evangelical creeds and customs agree, and on these they can unite, but on nothing else." True unity must be honest. And so Crosby proposed a realistic model of cooperation: "periodical congress for prayer and conference, and . . . cooperative work in Christian

---

[12] Dabney, "Broad Churchism, 457.
[13] Charles Hodge, *Discussions in Church Polity* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1878), 95.
[14] Dabney, "What Is Christian Union?", 437.
[15] Peck, "Creeds of Christendom," 219.

association and alliances for general effort against falsehood and infidelity. This union is feasible . . ."[16]

So why did the Old School Presbyterians believe that different denominations could promote church unity? Because they saw no viable alternative. The only other options were enforced organizational union—producing hypocrisy or conflict—or a denial of doctrine for the sake of superficial peace. Upholding strict orthodoxy within each communion allowed for clarity and integrity while preserving the real spiritual unity that exists among all true believers. This wide catholicity would be one of mutual recognition, love, and cooperation wherever possible. Its only limit would be that there would be no elimination of differences in secondary matters of doctrine, worship, and government. But even there, the way such differences were held—with love, honesty, and humility—would manifest the church's unity more clearly than any superficial merger.

This kind of unity would not happen by accident. It would require deliberate action. Christians were—and are—called to lean into this wide catholicity. But how can we do that? That is the question we will take up in the next chapter.

[16] Howard Crosby, "Open Letters," *The Century Magazine* 31, no. 5 (March 1886):797.

CHAPTER NINE

How to Promote Wide Catholicity

How did the Old School Presbyterians seek to foster a wide catholicity while remaining uncompromising in their strict orthodoxy? Given these two boundaries—faithfulness to biblical orthodoxy and a genuine desire for catholicity—what strategy could they follow? How could they promote church unity and love without reducing all distinctions to theological mush?

The first and most crucial point is this: for the Old School, unity began in the heart, not in organizational structure. A.A. Hodge put it succinctly: "The principle of union is spiritual and vital, and hence must be the result of an internal growth. The more perfect the inward life, the more perfect will be its outward expression in form." The path to unity would not be forged by cobbling together denominations but by "the spontaneous action of central vital forces from within."[1] Unity must come from within—by conviction, not compromise.

Thomas Smyth agreed. He insisted that the only kind of unity promised to the church was "in spirit and in truth." Yet this unity was not passive. It had to be demonstrated and practiced in the midst of visible diversity. The church, even now, was called to make its unity "as irresistible as it might be in overcoming the world and dethroning error."[2] Such unity, grounded in Romans 15:7, would glorify God.

Robert Lewis Dabney forcefully rejected any amalgamation of denominations based on the lowest common denominator. In his essay "The Basis for Church Unity," he argued that such unions would compromise the strict orthodoxy required by Scripture—for the glory of God and the good of His people. Yet Dabney was no isolationist. On the contrary, he believed there were many real and practical ways denominations could pursue peace and foster unity without sacrificing truth.

---

[1] A.A. Hodge, "Open Letters," *The Century Magazine* 31, no. 5 (March 1886):799.

[2] Thomas Smyth, *"The Fundamental Doctrines of Christianity: The True and Only Required Basis of Charity and United Christian Effort,"* address delivered at Philadelphia, on the twenty second anniversary of the American Sunday School Union, May 17, 1846 (Philadelphia: American Sunday School Union, 1846), 32.

First, Dabney acknowledged that in some cases, separate denominations were unnecessary. Where no meaningful doctrinal or practical differences existed, churches should unite. "In such case the inconveniences of separation are compensated by no gain of peace or of conscientious integrity."[3] That was the acid test: if separation didn't serve the cause of peace or integrity, it should end.

Second, where merger was not possible, mutual recognition was essential. Denominations, he said, should recognize one another's *valid church character*. How far did that recognition extend? Dabney answered: "To all communions which retain those features which are the marks of a visible church—the Word, the ministry, and the sacraments of Christ, even to that degree which is fundamental to the great end of the church, the redemption of souls."[4] This was rooted in the Old School view of fundamental doctrines: any church that faithfully pointed sinners to Christ as their only hope for justification, sanctification, and eternal life must be regarded as a true church of Christ.

Third, this recognition extended to the ministry and sacraments. Dabney wrote, "Each denomination should recognize the validity of the ministry and sacraments of every other evangelical denomination. The intercommunion of their ministers as ministers, and their members as members, should manifest this brotherhood on all suitable occasions."[5] As we've seen, this principle was consistently practiced in Old School interaction with other evangelical bodies.

Fourth, churches should recognize each other's discipline—at least wherever it was consistent with the common faith. Differences would sometimes arise, but a general posture of mutual acknowledgment based on traditional Christian morality and orthodoxy should prevail.

Fifth, every individual Christian had two duties: to cultivate "moderate and charitable feelings towards others" and to grow sincerely in the "knowledge of revealed truth." Dabney believed these were not in tension, but mutually reinforcing. The more Christians drew near to the infallible standard, "the more will they approach nearer to each other."[6] For this he cited James 3:17–18 and Philippians 3:15–16.

Charles Hodge made similar recommendations. He argued that it was "obviously the duty of different denominations to cultivate peace." Even where real disagreement existed, they should "avoid all the causes of alienation and ill-feeling" and instead "do everything in their power to promote Christian love and fellowship." At the same time, they must "maintain what they believe to be the truth, and endeavour to promote unity of faith"—but always "in a spirit free of rivalry and sectarian conflict."[7]

---

[3] Robert L. Dabney, "What Is Christian Union?" in *Discussions: Evangelical*, ed. C. R. Vaughan, vol. 2 (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1891), 445.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] *Ibid.,* 446.

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] Charles Hodge, *Discussion in Church Polity* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1878), 100.

Like Dabney, Hodge laid out specific steps. First, churches should recognize each other as true churches of Jesus Christ. To withhold such recognition required an extraordinary burden of proof. As Hodge warned: "Those who refuse to recognize Christians as Christians, sin against Christ and commit an offence which is severely denounced in the word of God. The same principle applies to Churches."[8] For a church to lack legitimacy, it would have to lack something essential "to the existence of piety and to the presence and operations of the Holy Spirit." Minor flaws or imperfections were not enough. Thus, "it is also their duty to make nothing essential either to the existence of the Church or to Church fellowship, which the word of God does not declare to be essential."[9]

Second, churches that recognize one another must also share in ministry and sacraments. Hodge wrote:

> It is included in the acknowledgment that a body of Christians is a Church of Christ, that we should commune with its members in public worship and in the sacraments and allow them to commune with us. This follows from the spiritual unity of the Church; from its having the same faith and the same Lord and God, and from the conditions of Church membership being the same for all Churches.[10]

Recognizing churchly character meant a genuine recognition of the acts of Christian ministry of other churches.

Third, this intercommunion must include ministers. Hodge was clear: "It is not necessary therefore that one denomination should concern itself how other denominational Churches exercise the right of appointing men to the ministry, provided it admit that they possess the right of appointment; and recognize those thus appointed as ministers of Christ." He gave the example of Methodists: "Presbyterians may recognize Methodist preachers as ministers of the gospel, and welcome them to their pulpits, but they cannot be expected to receive them into their own body or make them pastors of their own Churches. The same of course may be said of Methodists in regard to Presbyterians."[11] Orthodoxy was preserved and catholicity displayed.

Hodge also recommended practical cooperation. Churches should recognize each other's discipline and avoid planting competing churches where one already exists and is doing faithful work.[12] Such coordinated effort would visibly demonstrate unity without compromising secondary convictions.

---

[8] *Ibid.,* 97.
[9] *Ibid.*, 98.
[10] *Ibid.*
[11] *Ibid.,* 99.
[12] *Ibid.,* 100. Note that Hodge advocated for a sort of parity agreement with all evangelical churches: "When one Church has planted itself in a field which it is abundantly able to cultivate, it is a

John Holmes Agnew, in a sermon on Psalm 122:7 ("Peace be within thy walls, and prosperity within thy palaces"), likewise called the church to pursue peace—not by flattening differences, but by sanctifying them. First, he said, "The whole contest for the faith once delivered to the saints, must be conducted without strife or vain-glory, and with the meekness and gentleness of Christ; so that the sanctifying power of the gospel may be manifest even in controversy, and win opposers from the snare of the devil."[13] Controversy should never cancel charity.

Second, Agnew warned against letting secondary doctrines displace the fundamentals. He wrote:

> But how shall we sincerely offer up petitions for her welfare, or her unity, while those points on which we disagree, are magnified into mountains that separate us from each other; and the infinitely more important matters of agreement, are almost buried in oblivion, and excluded from exercising their appropriate influence to bind together the members of the body in sweetest harmony of love?[14]

In other words, the problem wasn't merely disagreement—it was misplaced emphasis. If the church failed to keep the fundamentals central, the peace of the church would unravel.

The Old School Presbyterians gave sustained thought to the pursuit of unity. They believed in a wide catholicity, but they refused to identify it with external, organizational union. Still, they did not rest passively. Unity, they believed, began in the heart—a heart devoted to truth and to the love of all who belonged to Christ. That unity must be practiced. It must be demonstrated. And anything that hindered it without being essential to the truth of Scripture must be laid aside. They would not abandon the doctrines they believed to be biblical. But they were equally committed to upholding the spirit of catholicity—the generous, loving, truth-tethered unity—that they believed the Lord of the Church required of them.

---

breach of the principles of unity for another denomination to contend for joint-occupation. This is a great evil and one of constant occurrence" (*ibid.*).

[13] John Holmes Agnew, "Motives and Means of Peace to the Churches," *The National Preacher*, vol. 10, no. 3 (1835): 238.

[14] *Ibid.*

CHAPTER TEN

Conclusion: Not Shrinking Our Inheritance

The Old School Presbyterians are rightly remembered for their deep concern for truth. Their commitment to doctrinal precision and theological integrity—anchored in the Westminster Standards—is a defining part of our heritage. But they were also passionate about Christian unity and wide catholicity. That too is our inheritance as Presbyterians, though it is often less emphasized.

It can be difficult to hold love and truth together. How do we obey the biblical commands to love one another while also contending for the faith once delivered to the saints? The Old School Presbyterians offer us a compelling model. We may not agree with every application they made, but their approach deserves serious consideration. They show that connection with other Christians does not require compromise, and that fidelity to truth need not entail isolation.

At the heart of their vision was the conviction that all true believers are already one in Christ. Living out that unity was not optional—it was obedience to the work of the Spirit. Practicing wide catholicity was not a burden but a joy. It was, in their view, cooperating with the Spirit, not resisting Him.

They also saw real benefit from these connections. The Old School Presbyterians were blessed by their fellowship with other Christians. They valued it. They were sharpened by it. And they looked back on those relationships with gratitude. Other Christians made a mark on them.

At the same time, their catholic spirit opened doors to share the riches of their own tradition. Their willingness to engage others in love created opportunities to offer the blessings they had received. Without that openness, they could not have drawn near enough to give what they had to offer.

This is the fruit of strict orthodoxy combined with wide catholicity: truth preserved, love extended, and mutual edification pursued. It is not a narrow legacy—it is a full and generous one. And it is ours. As heirs of the Old School Presbyterian tradition, we must not shrink our inheritance. We must reclaim *both* pillars: unwavering truth and unfeigned love for all who are in Christ.