

# PART 1



## Roots

*T*he Presbyterian church in the nineteenth century exercised an influence on American life out of proportion to its numerical strength. While other denominations transplanted from Europe maintained their connection with a mother church in Europe, Presbyterians began and eventually prospered without support from their predecessors in the old country. Lack of a bond with Presbyterians in Scotland did not prevent them from leaving a significant imprint on American ecclesiastical life and the larger culture as well. In fact, at the conclusion of the century, historian Robert Ellis Thompson attributed the measure of success the denomination enjoyed to “services it has rendered to theological science, the interest it has maintained in Christian doctrine, the high standard of intelligence it has set up for both its ministry and its people, its capacity to develop strength of character, its superior family discipline, and its conservative influence upon the national life.”<sup>1</sup> Thompson’s description of the Presbyterian denomination could also be ascribed to Charles Hodge, arguably the church’s most dominating figure in the first half of the century. Through the seminary where he taught, the journal he edited,

and the service he rendered in the courts of the Presbyterian church, Hodge also left a legacy out of proportion to what might be expected given his background. Left fatherless as a child and raised through the thriftiness and ingenuity of his mother, Hodge overcame hurdles that could have easily prevented his achieving the stature he had by the time of his death in 1878. In a clearly discernible trajectory, his family heritage, devout religious habits, education at Princeton College and Seminary, and early ministry provided a platform from which he later exercised enormous influence in American life. Firmly planted in twin emphases of early Presbyterianism—New Side piety and confessionalist traditions—Hodge imbibed and embraced practices and beliefs that would propel him to, by every measure, a remarkable ministry spanning more than fifty years.

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## *New Side Confessionalist*

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**C**harles Hodge was born, raised, and educated in the Presbyterian church, where he carried out an influential ministry for over half a century. He did so during the formative and arguably the most tumultuous period in American history. The nation was less than twenty-five years old when he was born on December 28, 1797. By the time of his death in 1878, his beloved country would have witnessed seismic shifts in its political, cultural, and social life. It would emerge from the larger Enlightenment era with its own distinctive intellectual traditions, solidify its national identity by the appearance of new political parties, experience rapid westward expansion and dramatic changes in demographic patterns, and eventually undergo the violent upheaval of a massive civil strife that almost severed the country in two.

No less a transformation would convulse his church. Formed in Philadelphia in 1706 by Francis Makemie and seven other pastors, American Presbyterianism was less than a hundred years old at Hodge's birth, yet had already suffered its first schism and reunion over revivalism and would experience intense debates over a wide range of biblical

and theological issues and two more debilitating divisions and one subsequent reunion before Hodge died.

No passive bystander in the midst of these events in decades of sweeping change, Hodge emerged not only as one of the most significant religious and educational figures of his era, but also as a prodigious intellectual voice commenting on issues and ideas across a wide cultural horizon. From religion in general to detailed biblical, theological, and denominational disputes, from fine points of American political and electoral debates to the latest developments in science, from the intricacies of Civil War strategy to discussions on the monumental issue of slavery, Hodge's probing, thoughtful analysis gained many followers. Hardly an issue in American public life escaped his notice. His meticulously crafted views became a significant theological force, shaping opinions throughout American culture.

While known primarily for his conservatism, his staunch advocacy of Old School Calvinism, and his remark that a new idea never originated at his seminary, Hodge also launched into uncharted waters. He bridged the gap between the First Great Awakening's revivalism, the engine that drove much of American religion from its inception, and the zenith of Old School confessionalism that dominated the Presbyterian denomination in the first half of the 1800s. He helped initiate the trend of American theologians' venturing to Europe to shore up deficiencies in their scholarship and to ensure that their schools graduated pastors fully apprised of the latest biblical and theological studies. His founding of Princeton's *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* helped to inaugurate the heyday of nineteenth-century religious journalism. Training more pastors than all other seminaries in his era combined, Hodge extended Presbyterianism's influence by fleshing out one of the most compelling, coherent worldviews of all his denominational peers. His explication of the core ideas and values of what became known as "The Princeton Theology" established a legacy within his denomination that lasted into the twentieth century.

Hodge traced his ancestral lineage in an autobiographical section of A. A. Hodge's biography of his father. Charles focused on his family's religious heritage, their economic prosperity, and their manifold contributions to American public life. The Hodges came from solid

Presbyterian stock that extended back to the early 1700s in northern Ireland. Following their parents' deaths, William, Andrew, and Hugh Hodge immigrated to America in 1730. They settled in Philadelphia, which boasted several churches, among them the Presbyterian church, which constructed its first building in 1704. The Hodge brothers not only prospered as Philadelphia merchants but established strong attachments to the Presbyterian denomination. Their involvement with the church intensified during the upheaval of the revival led by George Whitefield in 1743. Hannah Hodge, whom everyone knew as "a mother in Israel," wife of the youngest son, Hugh, was a child of a Huguenot refugee who had left France at the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, and along with other refugees helped to found First Presbyterian Church on Market Street in Philadelphia.<sup>1</sup>

In enumerating the backgrounds and occupations of his forebears, Hodge rehearsed their successful careers. While many were merchants, he listed physicians and surgeons, lawyers, a congressman, several United States senators, and a Supreme Court clerk. He took special notice of those who had served in the military, which included his father, Hugh. A graduate of the College of New Jersey in 1773, Hugh trained in medicine and served as a surgeon with the Pennsylvania troops in the Revolutionary War. British forces captured him and held him prisoner in November 1776, but he obtained release after several months through the efforts of George Washington. Hodge paid tribute to his father's courage in ministering to victims of the yellow-fever epidemics of 1793 and 1795. In describing his family background, Hodge commented, "These family details are of interest to those whom they concern." But he continued immediately with words that could easily summarize an emphasis that dominated his life: "I wish, however, that those who come after me should know that their ancestors and kindred were Presbyterians and patriots." Regardless of particular vocation, Hodge's family served both their church and their country.<sup>2</sup>

Besides historical details, Hodge also revealed the earliest religious influences in his family, which reflect the interplay between evangelical pietism of the First Great Awakening and traditional confessionalism as represented by the Old Side–New Side division that roiled Presbyterians and the New Light–Old Light separation among Congregationalists in

the eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup> The Hodge family became enmeshed in the dispute over revivalist piety and its role in religious experience. As a result of “religious excitement” that attended George Whitefield’s preaching, Hodge noted that two parties formed the Presbyterian church: those who favored the revival (the New Side) and their opponents (the Old Side). Both groups affirmed the doctrines of the Westminster Confession, but they differed so sharply over the role of religious experience or piety that the denomination split in 1741. The New Siders stressed evangelical conversion resulting in a life of pious living as essential to identifying oneself as a Christian and thus among God’s elect. In contrast, the Old Siders disparaged revivals and the enthusiasm that often accompanied them as a spurious form of religion. They claimed that since God’s election of believers resides in his mysterious decree, the only sure sign of his choosing lies not in a testimony of a radical conversion experience but rather in a person’s adherence to the doctrinal teaching of the Bible and the Westminster Confession. Hannah, Charles’s grandmother, joined First Church in the mid-1730s, but it was predominantly confessionalist in its sympathies. Since she attributed her conversion to the ministry of Whitefield, she left First Church with other New Side converts. A throng of 160 communicants formed Second Presbyterian Church in 1743 as a New Side congregation pastored by Gilbert Tennent, who gained notoriety for his fierce denunciation of Old Side Presbyterians as unregenerate Pharisees in his famous sermon “Dangers of an Unconverted Ministry.”<sup>4</sup>

In 1745 Hannah married Hugh Hodge, also a founder of Second Church, who served as deacon until his death. The Hodge family established a pattern of denominational loyalty that survived for generations. Their home became the center of New Side activity, gaining fame as “the resort of clergymen and the centre of religious meetings.” Hodge expanded on Hannah’s religious influence and independent spirit by noting that her house after her husband’s death was “the home of several old and infirm ladies, supported in great measure by her bounty; and here also originated the weekly meeting for prayer and religious instruction observed still in the Second Church, and in most of the other Presbyterian Churches of the city.” Still more telling, Hodge relates the successful outcome of the meetings and the barely

disguised disdain of denominations that did not share their revivalist sympathies: “The crowd [of people gathering in their home was] often so great as to fill, not only the parlor and kitchen but even the back garden, close up against Christ Church ground, and much to the offence of our Episcopal brethren, who called them ‘Those conventicles held by Mrs. Hodge.’” The term *conventicles* was the name given by seventeenth-century Anglicans to small nonconformist or dissenting groups meeting illegally or in secret for religious worship. They met for fellowship and Bible study. The Hodge family had a history of pietist activity within the church. They remained active in Second Church through successive generations down to Charles’s elder brother Dr. Hugh Lenox Hodge, who served as ruling elder. Thus Hodge grew up an heir of evangelical piety, familiar with its religious enthusiasm and activism.<sup>5</sup>

Hodge, however, also recounted other practices reflecting that in addition to pietism, his family retained important elements of Old Side confessionalism, an alternative and somewhat antagonistic expression of religious experience from that of New Side evangelicalism.<sup>6</sup> Confessionalist Presbyterians, like their counterparts in Lutheran and Episcopalian denominations, explained religious experience primarily in terms of doctrinal faithfulness to church confessions and participation in the sacraments and corporate worship over against revivalist-inspired piety that characterized the Great Awakening. They stressed catechetical instruction and participation in congregational life under careful oversight of the clergy, which stood in contrast to the privatism and individualism of revivalism. Charles Hodge’s theological perspective and deepest religious convictions as well as his teaching, publishing, and participation in denominational affairs mirrored his family’s background in the internecine quarrels of these two rival traditions that competed in forming the identity of American Presbyterianism from the mid- to late eighteenth century.

Occasionally the tension between these two traditions has been summarized as the struggle between ardor (the evangelical zeal of New Siders) and order (the ecclesiastical and liturgical emphases of Old Siders). The former stressed personal holiness and devotional fervor manifested in keeping diaries of religious experiences and other

expressions of personal devotion as indispensable qualities for effective ministry. Old Siders, however, demanded theological precision and strict subscription to the Westminster Standards as more important. Thus, in the early decades of American Presbyterianism, the denomination experienced a heightened tension over its very identity. This conflict constitutes the background for interpreting the life of Charles Hodge.

Both elements play prominent roles in shaping his early life. Isolating these two strands in Hodge's experience and subjecting them to probing analysis as autonomous entities is possible—but only in the abstract. The thesis of this study is that Charles Hodge manifested the attributes associated with Calvinistic confessionalism (strong adherence to creedal religion, liturgical forms, and corporate worship) as well as the characteristics of evangelical pietism (the necessity of vital religion marked by conversion, moral activism, and individual pious practices). That he should be raised in Philadelphia, the cradle of American Presbyterianism, an originally staunch Old Side territory that had given way to New Side influences during the First Great Awakening, only strengthens the notion that these two strands could be combined in a figure that loomed so large in the Presbyterian church. But as the nineteenth century unfolded and new factions developed within the denomination, Hodge became one of the prominent leaders of Old School Presbyterianism. Hodge never relinquished his eighteenth-century New Side heritage, though he criticized its revivalist excesses. It not only shaped his early years but remained an integral part of his belief and practice throughout his life. But he also became firmly convinced that as Presbyterianism developed in the nineteenth century, Old School traditions held stronger claims than the New School to the origin of American Presbyterianism and what constituted its identity in both belief and practice. This study narrates Hodge's role in substantiating those claims.