

The Presbyterian Critic

Editors: Stuart Robinson and Thomas E. Peck.

Series overview—

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1856 – 2.1 (January 1856) through 2.5 & 6 (September & November 1856). Printed by the Press of S.S. Mills, Baltimore, Md. 19 libraries indicate holding all or part of the 1856 volume.

Organizational Sketch—

[excerpted from Ch. 10 of Peter Wallace's dissertation, <http://www.peterwallace.org/dissertation/10constitution.htm>]

A. Stuart Robinson and the Presbyterian Critic

"In Baltimore, Robert J. Breckinridge's quest for reform found a new voice. In January of 1855, two Baltimore pastors, Stuart Robinson (Central Presbyterian Church) and Thomas E. Peck (Broadway Street Church) launched the *Presbyterian Critic* and *Monthly Review*, a magazine in the tradition of Breckinridge's Baltimore *Literary and Religious Magazine*, though with less anti-Catholic material.[98] The editors conceived their paper as a forum for discussion of church polity, accessible to all officers of the church. From the start they argued that the boards had been "hastily devised" and did not accord with a "strict construction" of the powers conferred by the Constitution on the Judicatories of the Church," and they served notice that they would oppose "all tendencies within the church itself, to the centralization of power." [99] While both Robinson and Thornwell emphasized the spirituality of the church, Robinson concerned himself more with the centralization of power.

After the first issue, the gloves came off, and Robinson launched his assault on the boards of the church. He had authored a review of the 1854 General Assembly in the *Southern Presbyterian Review*, echoing Breckinridge and Thornwell's claim that the Boards were a residue of Congregationalism and calling for reform "either peacefully or forcibly, through the Boards, or over the Boards." [100] Robinson argued that the "radical differences amongst us, as to the polity and measures of the church," amounted to "two distinct Presbyterianisms." In a telling comparison, he suggested that "It is a difference analogous in some respects, to that which divides the two political parties of the country,—the theory of 'strict construction,' as it is called, against the theory of large powers to the General Government." [101] Robinson would defend the strict constructionist position, convinced that the constitution of the church provides for "all the agencies and means necessary to carry out the purposes of the church." [102]

Robinson's rhetorical jabs at his colleagues provoked a war of words and wit. Virtually every issue of the *Presbyterian Critic* included lengthy sparring with other editors, liberally spiced with sarcasm and ridicule. [103] Robinson was constitutionally unable to keep quiet in the face of criticism. He kept up a regular exchange with other editors, exercising a caustic tongue at times. [104] While David McKinney, editor of the *Presbyterian Banner*, criticized certain aspects of the boards, he thought Robinson paranoid. Robinson's insinuations and personal attacks disgusted him. [105] McKinney sought some minor reforms to improve the efficiency of the boards, but Robinson's all-out assault disturbed him.

Nonetheless, Robinson hoped that his efforts would bear fruit in continuing the Breckinridge reformation of the church. Indeed, he suggested that the reformation had largely succeeded, and that virtually all ministers now agreed that "the form of the Church is of divine authority." [106] He identified three positions within the church: 1) "thorough Presbyterianism" that affirmed the "Act and Testimony" of 1834, sometimes called "High Church Presbyterianism," characterized by Thornwell and Dr. John Krebs of New York; [107] 2) the "Virginia School" of Archibald Alexander and William Swan Plumer, which joined in the reform of the church in 1837 but was not entirely committed to further reform; and 3) the "Princeton Party" led by Charles Hodge, which "driven to make election by the events of 1837 and '38, preferred the Old School" but had firmly stood against further reform. [108] Robinson made it clear that he stood for "thorough Presbyterianism."

In 1856 Robinson was called to Danville Theological Seminary, where he joined R. J. Breckinridge on the faculty. In 1858 he published *The Church of God As An Essential Element of the Gospel*, setting forth his conviction that "an ecclesiastical reformation was no less important than the reformation doctrines of justification by faith and the exclusive authority of Scripture." [109] Robinson suggested a historical progression in the development of doctrine. Whereas the early church articulated the doctrines of the Trinity and Christology, and the Reformation first clearly stated the doctrines of salvation, he believed that the American Presbyterian Church had the opportunity to clarify the doctrine of the church:

Do not the providences of God toward the American Church, in freeing her from the civil domination which, by violence or seduction, silenced the martyr voice of her Scotch mother when she would testify for Christ's crown and covenant, and in placing the Church here in a position (For the first time, perhaps, since the Apostles), to

actualize fully and without hindrance her true nature and functions as a spiritual commonwealth--do not all seem to indicate that the time has fully come for the final development of the visible Church as a governmental power on earth, yet a kingdom not of this world, a people not reckoned among the nations?[110]
 The spirituality of the church, for Robinson, flowed from the old Scottish doctrine of the church, once the church was freed from the encumbrance of the state.”

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