

**Church History 101**  
**Lesson 28**  
**Presbyterians Divide and Reunite**

**Key Concepts:** Presbyterians in America have a long history of dividing and uniting into different Synods and denominations, and then sometimes reuniting. This trend began before the American Revolution and continues to this day.

**The Story:** Presbyterians in America began their life as offshoots of Scottish and Scotch-Irish Presbyterians, French Huguenots and English Puritans. Each brought with them a particular set of values and traditions. One of the things that they held in common though was the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) which was their theological foundation. Even so, as time passed, the struggles of creating a new church in a world in which there was individual religious freedom and experience, and slavery would cause the Presbyterian Church to continually search for its identity.

The first presbytery (a group of churches in a geographical area) was organized in 1706 and the first Synod (a group of presbyteries) in 1716. These presbyteries and Synods were different from their counterparts in Europe because they were designed to have power centered at the local level rather than in a centralized church hierarchy. One result of this local control was that ministers, who were required to agree (“subscribe”) with the entirety of the Westminster Confession (required by the Adopting Act of 1729), could be allowed to disagree with certain parts, if their presbytery agreed.

Local control quickly led to the first division within the new denomination. This was the “Old-side/New-side” split (1741-1758), where the New-siders demanded that ministers must be examined on their personal religious experience, and not merely on their knowledge. Old-siders disagreed and expelled the New-siders. A reunion occurred with the New-siders being victorious.

The next division (“Old-school/New-school” in 1837) came over the Plan of Union (1801) in which the Presbyterians and the Congregationalists agreed to work together to establish churches in the west. The Old-school folks did not like the Union and wanted to maintain a solely Presbyterian outlook (theology and missions). The New-school folks liked the Union and were more willing to be open about differences in theology. This division would last until the Civil War.

The next great divide was over slavery. The Presbyterian Church had first declared slavery to be wrong in 1787. As the nation moved toward division, the Southern Old-school churches formed their own Synod (1857) and then their own church (The Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America) in 1861, just after the Civil War began. Interestingly enough, the Old-school and New-school groups reunited in both north and south during the conflict.

Following the war, the southern church continued as an independent church. It would splinter in 1972 when churches that rejected women in leadership would leave and form the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). The northern church splintered with the creation of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) in 1981, again over the ordination of women. The remaining southern and northern churches reunited in 1983, though many southern churches joined with the PCA or the EPC instead of the new church, to which we belong, the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. (PCUSA). Finally, in 2012, a new denomination, the Evangelical Covenanting Order of Evangelical Presbyterians (ECO) was formed by churches that did not want to allow LGBTQ persons to be ordained as elders and ministers.

**Questions**

1. How would you suppose the idea of individualism impacts the church?
2. What is your denominational family history, if any? How has that impacted your faith journey?
3. Why have you chosen this church?