

The Early Years of the ARP

For its first 90 years, the ARP was known as the "Associate Reformed Synod of the South. Then, the "Associate Reformed Synod." And finally, from 1935 through the present, "The General Synod of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church."

The Associate Reformed Synod in the South was, at its founding, largely composed of Seceders who came from Ireland after America gained its independence. As such, its great concerns were purity of worship, the free offer of the gospel, personal holiness as a loving response to and necessary part of salvation (but never as a condition for it), and the freedom of particular churches to identify to the Presbytery the men whom they wish to call as ministers.

Several issues immediately facing the Synod reinforced its Southern identity. One of the great concerns for the first generation of the ARSoS was the slowness of growth. In preceding centuries, new works like this had seen rapid growth. But the economic disparity in the nation was sending many Reformed Presbyterians to the "Northwest" (mostly Western Pennsylvania, and some of what is now the Midwest). Of course, the northern industrial states were using the south to pay their tariffs, among other economic advantages that exacerbated the disparity.

The latitudinarian beliefs in the north about open communion and worship singing had also established an ecclesiastical climate in which a people who wanted their own way more and more were becoming less and less likely to join conservative churches in the south.

Finally, with the only Reformed, Presbyterian seminary (at the time) being in New York, it was difficult to produce the ministers needed to grow the church by evangelism. This was exacerbated when the first fifteen years of the Synod saw the deaths of several ministers and two theological students. Then the seminary was lost altogether from the time that the Northern church joined with the General Assembly until the Synod of New York was able to recover the seminary's library.

In 1826, the Synod of the South proposed a reunion to the Synod of the West and the Synod of New York. However, the Synod of the West stated that it could not tolerate the now-increased liberalism (they used the word latitudinarianism) of the Synod of New York. Further efforts fell apart, after 1831, when the Synod of the South, which had opposed slavery to that point, received an influx of congregations that were not as strongly against it.

In 1831, the more liberal and northern Associate Synod passed an act requiring immediate manumission. This caused a flow of a number of congregations in "Associate Presbytery" (congregations in the Carolinas that had not come out with the "Synod of the Carolinas) to come back into the Associate Reformed Synod of the South. While the issue was more with respect to "immediate" than "manumission," it still had the effect of consolidating the Synod's southern identity.

The need for ministers eventually led to the establishing of a theological professor, E. E. Pressly, who was at that time pastoring in Due West in 1837. His academy was at first called "Clark and Erskine Seminary," with a reorganization and expansion in 1839. The name was changed to Erskine College in 1843.

From its beginning until the War between the States, the ARSoS had encouraged its ministers to spend some of the year circuit-riding the various mission stations to see congregations built up. Of particular note to us are the founding of the Tennessee Presbytery in 1837, with four ministers, and the founding of the Alabama Presbytery in 1842.