46. The Reformed record: coercion, witch trials, race and abuse

This chapter sets out the record of the Reformed and Presbyterian churches in the same format as the other records: what happened, the criticism, the Reformed response, and whether it was corrected. It begins with the coercion of conscience in the first Reformed cities and colonies: the drowning of Anabaptists in Zwingli's Zurich, the burning of Michael Servetus in Calvin's Geneva, the hanging of Quakers in Puritan Massachusetts, and the Puritan Cromwell's storming of Drogheda and Wexford. It then turns to the witch trials of Reformed Scotland and of Salem; to the Dutch Reformed Church's theological defense of apartheid, American Presbyterians and slavery, and the Presbyterian residential schools in Canada; and to the abuse of missionaries' children uncovered by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s own inquiries. Each case draws on the churches' own statements and on the historians and reports that document it.

The criticism

- **The sword against dissent.** Reformed magistrates drowned, burned and hanged fellow Protestants for their faith, with the approval of the churches they consulted, and the Westminster Confession (1646) charged the magistrate to see "that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed" (23.3).
- **Discipline turned to persecution.** In Scotland the kirk sessions questioned suspected witches and gathered the evidence against them; in Massachusetts the churches excommunicated the accused before they were hanged.
- **Scripture read in the service of race.** Southern Presbyterians defended slavery from the Bible, and in 1974 the Dutch Reformed Church gave apartheid what its historians call a biblical foundation.
- **Partnership with the state.** The churches carried out governments' policies of assimilation in Canada's residential schools.
- **Officials who did not act.** Mission administrators were told of the abuse of missionaries' children and, in the words of the church's own inquiry, "key opportunities were repeatedly missed."

How the Reformed answer

- **Councils may err.** The Westminster Confession teaches that "all synods or councils, since the Apostles' times, whether general or particular, may err" (31.3), so a Reformed church can

confess its own past errors and revise its standards, as American Presbyterians revised 23.3 in 1788.

- **Correction from within.** Many of the sharpest critics were Reformed: Increase Mather against spectral evidence at Salem, Reformed churches in Europe against the Dutch Reformed Church's 1974 report, and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Confession of Belhar against apartheid.
- **Confession in their own assemblies.** The churches have apologized in their own courts and words: Zurich to the Anabaptists (1983, 2004), the Church of Scotland for the witch trials (2022), the Dutch Reformed Church on apartheid (1986, 1990, 1998), the Presbyterian Church in Canada (1994, 2024), the Presbyterian Church in America (2002, 2016) and the PC(USA) (2022).
- **Their age and their magistrates.** Defenders note that the early sentences were passed by civil courts under the laws of the time, in Zurich for sedition rather than opinion, and that their heirs have since condemned them, as the Geneva monument to Servetus calls his burning "an error which was that of his age."

Summary

1. The persecution of the Anabaptists in Zurich

Period: 1525–1614

Status: APOLOGIZED FOR

Key correction: Swiss Reformed apology (1983); Zurich reconciliation (2004)

2. The burning of Michael Servetus

Period: 1553

Status: ACKNOWLEDGED

Key correction: Westminster 23.3 revised (1788); expiatory monument (1903)

3. The hanging of Quakers in Puritan Massachusetts

Period: 1656–1661

Status: ENDED

Key correction: Royal mandate (1661)

4. Cromwell's army at Drogheda and Wexford

Period: 1649

Status: DISPUTED

Key correction: No church statement; historians divided

5. The Scottish witch trials

Period: 1563–1736

Status: APOLOGIZED FOR

Key correction: Church of Scotland apology (2022)

6. The Salem witch trials

Period: 1692–1693

Status: CORRECTED

Key correction: Sewall and jurors (1697); convictions reversed (1711)

7. The Dutch Reformed Church and apartheid

Period: 1960–1998

Status: PARTLY CORRECTED

Key correction: *Church and Society* (1986); Rustenburg (1990); readmitted to WARC (1998)

8. American Presbyterians and slavery

Period: 1818–1865

Status: APOLOGIZED FOR

Key correction: PCA (2002); PC(USA) apology (2022)

9. Presbyterian residential schools in Canada

Period: 1884–1969

Status: APOLOGIZED FOR

Key correction: Confession (1994); Apology (2024)

10. Abuse of missionary children in the PC(USA)

Period: 1946–1990

Status: ACKNOWLEDGED

Key correction: Independent inquiries (2002, 2010)

Close all

A. Coercion, persecution and war

4

1. The persecution of the Anabaptists in Zurich 1525–1614 APOLOGIZED FOR
2. The burning of Michael Servetus 1553 ACKNOWLEDGED
3. The hanging of Quakers in Puritan Massachusetts 1656–1661 ENDED
4. Cromwell's army at Drogheda and Wexford 1649 DISPUTED

B. Witch trials

2

5. The Scottish witch trials 1563–1736 APOLOGIZED FOR
6. The Salem witch trials 1692–1693 CORRECTED

C. Race and colonialism

3

7. The Dutch Reformed Church and apartheid 1960–1998 PARTLY CORRECTED

8. American Presbyterians and slavery 1818–1865 APOLOGIZED FOR

9. Presbyterian residential schools in Canada 1884–1969 APOLOGIZED FOR

− D. Abuse 1

10. Abuse of missionary children in the PC(USA) 1946–1990 ACKNOWLEDGED

The other records: Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Anglican, Methodist, Baptist.

1. The persecution of the Anabaptists in Zurich 1525–1614

APOLOGIZED FOR

WHAT HAPPENED

Felix Manz had worked with Ulrich Zwingli, including on a new Bible translation, before he and his circle, the first Swiss Brethren, broke with Zwingli, accusing him of delaying reform and of compromising with the authorities, and rejected infant baptism. Zwingli debated them publicly in January 1525, and Zurich's government sided with him. In March 1526, as Manz was sentenced to life imprisonment, the council made Anabaptists who offended again liable to death. In December 1526 the court condemned Manz for "his seditious character" and "his insurrection against the authorities," and on January 5, 1527 he was drowned in the Limmat, a death usually reserved for women and thought especially humiliating. Five more Anabaptists were later drowned in the same river. The last Swiss Anabaptist martyr, Hans Landis, was beheaded in Zurich on September 29, 1614 for rebellion, after attempts to send him to the galleys and to make him emigrate had failed.

The criticism

Mennonite and other Anabaptist historians, and many Reformed historians since, point out that a city which had reformed its church by appeal to Scripture killed fellow Protestants for reading Scripture differently on baptism. The charge of sedition, they argue, was a cover for punishing belief. For centuries the Anabaptist descendants who visited Zurich found no memorial; a request in 1952 for a plaque at the river was refused.

Reformed response

Zwingli and the council treated the movement as a threat to the civil order of a Christian city, so the sentences were framed as punishment for sedition and defiance of the magistrate, not for opinion

alone, and Zwingli tried to persuade Manz to recant after his arrest. The Reformed churches of Switzerland have since rejected that reasoning in their own words. The Swiss Reformed church first apologized to the Anabaptists in 1983. At a reconciliation conference at the Grossmünster on June 26, 2004, attended by about 400 people from four continents, Reformed leaders "expressed regrets for the persecution of the early Anabaptists," and the Mennonite representatives accepted the confession.

Was it corrected? Apologized for. Apology of the Swiss Reformed church (1983); reconciliation conference in Zurich and a memorial plaque on the bank of the Limmat (2004). A dialogue between the World Communion of Reformed Churches and Mennonite World Conference ran from 2019 to 2025. At the Grossmünster on May 29, 2025, on the 500th anniversary of Anabaptism, Reformed Christians called the persecution "a betrayal of the gospel," and the two churches' general secretaries washed each other's feet.

Sources: Swissinfo, "The Reformation eats its young: the Anabaptist Felix Manz meets a terrible end"; Word&Way, "Troubling the water in Switzerland"; Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz, "Landis, Hans"; Christian Century, "Century Marks" (August 2004); Bridgefolk, from MWC News Service, "Confession and forgiveness mark Anabaptist-Reformed conference" (July 9, 2004); Mennonite World Conference, "Mennonite and Reformed reconciliation in a global perspective" (June 11, 2019); Anabaptist World, "3,500 gather in Zurich to celebrate 500 years of Anabaptism" (June 2, 2025).

2. The burning of Michael Servetus 1553 ACKNOWLEDGED

WHAT HAPPENED

Michael Servetus, a Spanish physician and theologian, had published books rejecting the doctrine of the Trinity. He escaped from Catholic custody in France, where the authorities at Lyons condemned him to be burned, and in August 1553 he was recognized at church in Geneva and arrested. Calvin supplied the articles of accusation. Geneva's council tried him for heresy from August 14 to October 25, 1553, chiefly for his views on the Trinity and baptism, and sought the opinion of neighboring Reformed churches, which agreed that he was guilty. On October 27, 1553 he was burned alive at Champel. Calvin, in Britannica's words, "pressed for execution, although by beheading rather than by fire"; his plea for the milder death, joined by Farel, was refused.

The criticism

The case has been the chief charge against Calvin's Geneva since the sixteenth century. Sebastian Castellio, replying to Calvin in June 1554 in a work that circulated in manuscript until 1612, wrote: "To kill a man is not to defend a doctrine, it is to kill a man." Historians note that Calvin was responsible for the arrest and conviction, that the Reformed churches consulted approved the verdict, and that the Westminster Confession (1646) still charged the magistrate to see "that all blasphemies and heresies be

suppressed" (23.3). The city of Geneva now describes Servetus's death as a symbol of religious intolerance.

Reformed response

Reformed writers who defend Calvin place the trial in its age: the Catholic authorities had already condemned Servetus to the same death, the sentence was passed by the city councils, not by Calvin, who held no power "either to condemn or to save him," all the Reformers consulted approved, and Calvin asked in vain for a less cruel death. Calvin's heirs have also condemned the act itself. On the 350th anniversary, Geneva Protestants raised an expiatory monument at Champel calling themselves "respectful and grateful sons of Calvin" but "condemning an error which was that of his age," and affirming liberty of conscience "according to the true principles of the Reformation and of the Gospel."

Was it corrected? Acknowledged. American Presbyterians revised Westminster 23.3 in 1788: civil magistrates may not assume the administration of the Word and sacraments, and must protect all churches and persons without preference. The expiatory monument at Champel is dated October 27, 1903; a statue of Servetus was added beside it in 2011, and the city of Geneva unveiled a plaque on its pedestal on September 29, 2025.

Sources: Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Michael Servetus"; Time, "Religion: For Heresy" (November 9, 1953); Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, "Calvin and Servetus"; Banner of Truth, William Wileman, "Calvin and Servetus" (2003, reposted 2009); Ephraim Emerton, "Calvin and Servetus," Harvard Theological Review 2/2 (1909); Wikipedia, "Against Calvin's Booklet" (Castellio, Contra libellum Calvini, art. 77); Ville de Genève, "Stèle, statue et plaque Michel Servet"; Ville de Genève, "Inauguration d'une plaque épigraphique en hommage à Michel Servet" (September 29, 2025); Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Westminster Confession of Faith (American text).

3. The hanging of Quakers in Puritan Massachusetts 1656–1661

ENDED

WHAT HAPPENED

The General Court of Massachusetts Bay, the Puritan (Congregationalist) colony, passed the first of a series of laws against Quakers on October 14, 1656: shipmasters who brought them were fined, and Quakers were jailed, whipped and kept at labor. In 1657 men who returned were to lose their ears and, on a third return, to have "their tongues bored through with a hot iron." On October 19, 1658 the court, by a vote of 12 to 11, made banishment "upon pain of death." William Robinson and Marmaduke Stevenson were hanged on October 27, 1659. Mary Dyer, reprieved at the gallows that day, came back and was hanged on June 1, 1660. William Leddra, who had returned again and again after whipping and banishment, was hanged on Boston Common on March 14, 1661, the last to die.

The criticism

Quaker writers and historians of religious liberty argue that men and women who had come to New England to worship as their consciences required hanged others for doing the same, and that whipping, mutilation and the gallows were used against people whose offense was preaching and refusing the customary marks of deference. Dyer is remembered as the only woman executed in America for her religious beliefs.

Reformed response

The colony's magistrates held that they were guarding its religious and civil order from a "pernicious sect" that had "published and maintained many dangerous and horrid tenets." Governor John Endecott argued that whipping, imprisonment, mutilation and banishment had all failed to keep the Quakers out, and the death sentences fell only on those who returned after banishment under sentence of death.

Was it corrected? Ended. A royal mandate of Charles II dated September 9, 1661 ordered the court to stop punishing Quakers and to send any accused to England; in November 1661 Endecott agreed, and no more Quakers were hanged, though the whipping law stayed in force until his death in 1665. In 1959 a statue of Mary Dyer, authorized by the Massachusetts General Court, was placed outside the State House in Boston.

Sources: Douglas O. Linder, Famous Trials, "The Life, Trials, and Execution of Mary Dyer: A Chronology"; Douglas O. Linder, Famous Trials, "The Life, Trials, and Execution of Mary Dyer: An Account" (2019); Famous Trials, "Mary Dyer Trials (1659–60)"; Murray N. Rothbard, "The Last American Martyr," Mises Institute (August 14, 2012), from *Conceived in Liberty*; Friends Center, "Mary Dyer Statue".

4. Cromwell's army at Drogheda and Wexford 1649 DISPUTED

WHAT HAPPENED

Oliver Cromwell, a Puritan of the Independent party and commander of the English Parliament's army, besieged the Royalist-held town of Drogheda in September 1649. Its commander, Sir Arthur Aston, would not surrender, and on September 11 the town was stormed. Almost the entire garrison of about 3,000 men was killed, many after they had tried to surrender. Writing to the Speaker of Parliament from Dublin on September 17, Cromwell reported, "I think that night they put to the sword about two thousand men," and "I believe all their Fryers were knockt on the head promiscuously, but two." A Parliamentary list gave 2,800 soldiers killed "and many inhabitants." At Wexford the following month his troops broke in while surrender talks were under way; some 2,000 soldiers and 1,500 townspeople are reported to have died, and much of the town was burned.

The criticism

Irish historians, above all Micheál Ó Siochrú in *God's Executioner*, describe Drogheda as a premeditated act of religious and ethnic revenge and Cromwell's conduct as beyond the pale even by the standards of his time. They point to his own theology of the event: he called it "a righteous Judgement of God upon these Barbarous wretches," words commonly read as a reference to the killings of Protestants in the rising of 1641, and Catholic priests and friars were singled out.

Reformed response

Cromwell's defenders argue that he kept to the laws of war of his day, that he hoped the example would make other towns surrender and so prevent further bloodshed, and that he was more restrained than many commanders in Ireland. Later in 1649, at New Ross, he denied having killed anyone in Ireland who was not in arms. Tom Reilly, in *Cromwell: An Honourable Enemy* (1999) and *Cromwell Was Framed* (2014), argues that there is no compelling evidence that large numbers of civilians were killed at Drogheda, and that at Wexford townspeople died by drowning while fleeing or in crossfire. No church court acted at Drogheda; the question is how far the providential reading of the war that Cromwell shared with many Puritans shaped what his army did.

Was it corrected? Disputed. The campaign was the act of a state's army, not of a church, and no Reformed church has issued a statement on it. Historians remain divided between the traditional account, defended by Ó Siochrú, and Reilly's revision; one reviewer of Reilly concluded that a targeted massacre of civilians is not proven, while the killing of the garrison after attempts to surrender is not in doubt.

Sources: The Cromwell Association, "Cromwell to Speaker Lenthall, 17 September 1649" (text, with commentary by Joan Redmond, 2018); Paul Vallely, "Was Cromwell a revolutionary hero or a genocidal war criminal?", The Independent, repr. History News Network (September 4, 2008); John Dorney, The Irish Story, "Book Review: Was Cromwell Framed?" (September 26, 2014).

5. The Scottish witch trials 1563–1736 APOLOGIZED FOR

WHAT HAPPENED

The Witchcraft Act of 1563, passed three years after Scotland's Reformation Parliament, made witchcraft a capital crime and stayed in force until 1736. The University of Edinburgh's Survey of Scottish Witchcraft identifies 3,837 people accused, and about 84 percent of the accused were women. More than 2,500 are believed to have been executed, most of them strangled and then burned after confessions obtained under torture. Complaints usually began in the kirk sessions and presbyteries, the local courts of the Reformed church, which "interrogated suspects and gathered evidence from neighbours"; having no

criminal jurisdiction, they passed cases to courts commissioned by the Privy Council. Agnes Sampson of East Lothian was burned on Castle Hill in Edinburgh in 1591, less than 100 yards from where the General Assembly now meets.

The criticism

Historians and the campaign Remembering the Accused Witches of Scotland, which asked the Church of Scotland for an apology in 2021, argue that the Kirk did more than share the beliefs of its age: its elders captured and questioned the accused before handing them to the criminal courts. Scotland's execution rate has been put at five times the European average. In the First Minister's words, those accused were targeted because they were "poor, different, vulnerable."

Reformed response

The Church of Scotland notes that it did not conduct the trials, which were the work of the civil courts under an act of Parliament, and its Theological Forum, preparing the apology, observed that those who took part were, "by their lights," trying to rid Scotland of evildoers engaged in what they believed was treasonous or idolatrous activity. But the Forum argued that an apology for a historic wrong need not mean blaming the dead: it can be a way to stand in solidarity with the victims and to affirm the community's present standards, and the General Assembly adopted that course. Proposing the motion, Susan Hardman Moore spoke of "affirming the dignity of the people our forerunners wrote off."

Was it corrected? Apologized for. The law was repealed in 1736. On March 8, 2022, First Minister Nicola Sturgeon gave a formal posthumous apology "to all of those accused, convicted, vilified or executed under the Witchcraft Act of 1563." On May 24, 2022 the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland voted to "acknowledge and regret the terrible harm caused" to those accused and prosecuted under Scotland's witchcraft laws, "the majority of them women, and apologise for the role of the Church of Scotland in such historical persecution."

Sources: University of Edinburgh, Survey of Scottish Witchcraft, FAQ; Euronews, "Scotland in formal apology over killing of thousands of women for witchcraft" (March 9, 2022); Holyrood, "Nicola Sturgeon issues formal apology to historic victims of witchcraft allegations" (March 8, 2022); Church of Scotland Theological Forum, "Apologising for Historic Wrongs" (2022); Edinburgh Evening News, "Church of Scotland General Assembly 2022: Official apology for church's role in persecution of those accused of witchcraft" (May 25, 2022); The Courier, "Fife campaigners welcome Church of Scotland apology" (June 3, 2022); Christian Post, "Church of Scotland apologizes for its role in torturing Scots accused of being 'witches'" (May 30, 2022).

6. The Salem witch trials 1692–1693 CORRECTED

WHAT HAPPENED

The accusations began in Salem Village, whose Congregational church had called Samuel Parris as pastor in 1689. Their pattern echoed the case of a Boston family described by the minister Cotton Mather in *Memorable Providences, Relating to Witchcraft and Possessions* (1689). On May 27, 1692 Governor William Phips set up a special Court of Oyer and Terminer, which admitted "spectral evidence," testimony that the accused's spirit had appeared to the afflicted. More than 200 people were accused. Nineteen were hanged, Giles Corey was pressed to death under heavy stones for refusing to plead, and at least five more died in custody. The church at Salem excommunicated Rebecca Nurse and Giles Corey before their deaths.

The criticism

Historians see Salem as the clearest case of a Puritan community's ministers, magistrates and congregations turning their fear of the devil on their own neighbors. A minister's published account of possession may have shaped the afflicted girls' behavior, the courts accepted spectral evidence, and the churches added excommunication to the death sentence. Cotton Mather's own part, in Britannica's words, was "complex," at times condoning the proceedings and at times questioning them.

Reformed response

Ministers helped bring the trials to an end. On October 3, 1692 Increase Mather, minister and president of Harvard, condemned the use of spectral evidence: "It were better that ten suspected witches should escape than that one innocent person should be condemned." On October 29 Phips halted the court; its successor disallowed spectral evidence and condemned only 3 of 56 defendants, and by May 1693 all those still held had been pardoned. A judge, the jurors and the churches then repented in public, in the terms of their own covenant theology.

Was it corrected? Corrected. In January 1697 the General Court held a day of fasting; on January 14 Judge Samuel Sewall's confession was read in Boston's South Church, and twelve former jurors asked pardon of God and of "the living sufferers." The Salem Village church reversed Martha Corey's excommunication in 1703; Ann Putnam Jr. confessed she had been "deluded by Satan" (1706); the Salem church reversed the excommunications of Rebecca Nurse and Giles Corey in 1712. On October 17, 1711 the General Court declared the convictions of 22 named people "null and void" and paid about £578 to their families. Massachusetts formally apologized in 1957, cleared five more names in 2001, and in 2022 exonerated Elizabeth Johnson Jr., sentenced to hang in 1693 but never executed or pardoned.

Sources: Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Salem witch trials"; Smithsonian Magazine, "A Brief History of the Salem Witch Trials"; University of Virginia, Salem Witch Trials Documentary Archive, "Samuel Sewall"; Witches of Massachusetts Bay, "Timeline

for Salem witch hunts"; University of Oregon, "Reversal of Attainder, October 17, 1711"; NPR via GBH, "After 329 years, a woman accused of being a witch in Salem has been exonerated" (May 26, 2022).

7. The Dutch Reformed Church and apartheid 1960–1998

PARTLY CORRECTED

WHAT HAPPENED

The Afrikaans-speaking Dutch Reformed Church (Nederduitsch Gereformeerde Kerk, NGK) long provided theological support for apartheid. After the Cottesloe consultation of December 1960, its synods studied race relations for more than a decade, and in 1974 the General Synod adopted *Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture* (*Ras, Volk en Nasie*). In the words of a historian of the church, the document confirmed its support for the National Party government's policy, "giving separate development a biblical foundation": mixed marriages were undesirable and forbidden, and common worship was permitted only in special situations.

The criticism

The sharpest criticism came from the Reformed family itself. Reformed churches in the Netherlands, Switzerland and Germany criticized the 1974 report; the German Reformierte Bund called it "a theological confirmation of the present political system." In August 1982 the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, meeting in Ottawa, declared "with black Reformed Christians of South Africa that apartheid is a sin, and that the moral and theological justification of it is a travesty of the Gospel" and "a theological heresy," and suspended the NGK. In October 1982 the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, of the same Dutch Reformed family, declared a status confessionis and drafted the Confession of Belhar.

Reformed response

The NGK changed its position in its own synods. *Church and Society* (October 1986) declared that "a forced separation and division of peoples cannot be considered a Biblical imperative," that apartheid as a political and social system "can not be accepted on Christian ethical grounds," and that the church's membership and doors were open to all races. In 1990 the synod confessed that "the church made the error of allowing forced separation and division of peoples in its own circle, to be considered a biblical narrative," and called any such system sinful. At the Rustenburg conference in November 1990 the theologian Willie Jonker confessed the guilt of the NGK and of the Afrikaner people, and the moderator, Pieter Potgieter, said the next day that this was the church's official position.

Was it corrected? Partly corrected. The Dutch Reformed Mission Church adopted Belhar in 1986. The NGK's changes divided it, and opponents founded the Afrikaanse Protestantse Kerk in 1987. In 1998 the NGK declared apartheid "wrong and sinful in its fundamental nature, effects and operations," and on

> October 13, 1998 it was readmitted to the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. Despite these admissions, South African History Online notes, the church remained racially segregated.

Sources: Johan M. van der Merwe, "The Dutch Reformed Church from Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture to Church and Society: the struggle goes on," Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae 39/1 (2013); World Alliance of Reformed Churches Newsroom, report from Debrecen (August 25, 1997); Christianity Today, "Church Leaders Condemn Apartheid" (December 17, 1990); South African History Online, "Dutch Reformed Church rejoins World Alliance of Reformed Churches"; PC(USA) News, "Belhar added to PC(USA)'s Book of Confessions" (June 23, 2016).

8. American Presbyterians and slavery 1818–1865 APOLOGIZED FOR

WHAT HAPPENED

In 1818 the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church unanimously called the enslaving of one people by another "a gross violation of the most precious and sacred rights of human nature" and "utterly inconsistent with the law of God," yet it warned against "harsh censures," judged immediate emancipation unsafe, and upheld the removal from the ministry of George Bourne of Virginia, who had denounced slaveholders as sinners. Many southern Presbyterians were slaveholders. After the Old School and New School divided in 1837–38, the Old School assembly said little about slavery until 1861. On November 29, 1860 Benjamin Morgan Palmer preached in New Orleans that the South's duty was "conserving and transmitting the system of slavery." In 1861 the southern Old School presbyteries formed the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America, with Palmer as first moderator; its address of December 1861, drafted by James Henley Thornwell, declared that the church had "utterly refused to make slaveholding a sin."

The criticism

Historians, African American Christians and Presbyterians themselves argue that a church which had condemned slavery in principle in 1818 then disciplined a minister for saying the same thing in practice, and that the principle that the church had no right to condemn what Scripture did not condemn shielded slaveholding from church discipline. Palmer's sermon and Thornwell's address carried the case for slavery and secession from the pulpit and the assembly.

Reformed response

Presbyterians point out that their church condemned slavery as contrary to the law of God in 1818, that the New School minister Jonathan Blanchard argued in a four-day public debate at Cincinnati in 1845 that slavery was sinful, and that the New School assembly cut off its southern commissioners in 1857. Southern defenders of the time held that they were following Scripture: "We have no right, as a Church, to enjoin it as a duty, or to condemn it as a sin." Their successors have repudiated that reading in formal acts of repentance.

Was it corrected? Apologized for. Slavery ended with emancipation (1865). In 2002 the Presbyterian Church in America declared that racism, "manstealing, and chattel slavery" were among the "heinous sins" that "stand in opposition to the Gospel," and confessed: "both we and our fathers, have failed to keep the commandments"; in 2016 it voted 861 to 123 to "recognize, confess, and condemn" past and continuing racial sins. In 2022 the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) adopted an apology to African Americans "for the sin of slavery and its legacy" by 373 to 19.

Sources: James Moorhead, Princeton and Slavery, "Slaveholding Presbyterians"; Presbyterian Historical Society, "Presbyterians and the Civil War: Witnesses to a Great Moral Earthquake"; Teaching American History, "Address by the General Assembly to All the Churches of Jesus Christ Throughout the Earth" (Augusta, December 1861); PCA Historical Center, 30th General Assembly (2002), statement on racial reconciliation; Christian Post, "PCA confesses sin of racism" (June 27, 2016); PC(USA) News, "A reading as a first act of repentance" (July 6, 2022).

9. Presbyterian residential schools in Canada 1884–1969

APOLOGIZED FOR

WHAT HAPPENED

Canada's government set out to assimilate Indigenous peoples to the dominant culture, and churches ran the residential schools to which Indigenous children were sent. The Presbyterian Church in Canada opened its first schools, at Birtle, Manitoba, and Round Lake, in 1884, and in all ran twelve in British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Ontario. When 70 percent of the church joined the Methodist Church and the Congregational Union to form the United Church of Canada on June 10, 1925, the continuing Presbyterian Church kept Birtle and the Cecilia Jeffrey school near Kenora, Ontario, and the rest passed to the United Church; the Presbyterian Church handed its two schools to the federal government in 1969. In the church's own later words, children were taken from their homes, punished for speaking their languages and subjected to physical, sexual, psychological and spiritual abuse, and some died at the schools, their burial sites sometimes unmarked.

The criticism

Survivors, Indigenous leaders and the church's own members argue that the church did not merely carry out government policy but shared its aims, treating Indigenous cultures and spiritual practices as obstacles to the Gospel, and that it failed to protect the children in its care. They also note how long the church took to say so: many communities served by its schools had never heard of its first confession, and the 2024 apology itself speaks of "the genocide of colonization, forced assimilation and racism to which we actively contributed."

Reformed response

The church has answered with confession rather than defense. Its Confession (June 9, 1994) acknowledged that it "co-operated" in the government's policy of assimilation, recognized the many members who "in good faith, gave unstintingly of themselves," and confessed that it "presumed to know better than Aboriginal peoples what was needed for life," used punishments "beyond any Christian maxim of care and discipline," and created conditions in which "there was opportunity for sexual abuse, and some were so abused." In 2024 it called that Confession inadequate and apologized "for the abuse Indigenous children suffered, including physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, and Spiritual abuses."

Was it corrected? Apologized for. The Presbyterian Church in Canada adopted its Confession in 1994 and presented it to Grand Chief Phil Fontaine in Winnipeg on October 8, 1994. In June 2024 it adopted "The Apology of The Presbyterian Church in Canada for its Complicity in Colonization and the Residential School System," with five commitments, among them responding to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 Calls to Action. The United Church of Canada, which took over most of the Presbyterian schools in 1925, apologized to First Nations in August 1986 and to former students of its residential schools in October 1998; its schools are treated in the Methodist record.

Sources: Presbyterian Church in Canada Archives, "The Presbyterian Church in Canada & Residential Schools: A Narrative History"; Presbyterian Church in Canada Archives, "Timeline of The Presbyterian Church in Canada and Indigenous People"; Presbyterian Church in Canada Archives, "The Confession" (July 15, 2019); The Confession of The Presbyterian Church in Canada (1994), full text; St. Andrew's Ottawa, text of the Presbyterian Church in Canada's 2024 Apology; Presbyterian Church in Canada, "Indigenous Justice"; United Church of Canada, "Historical Timeline"; United Church of Canada, "Apologies".

10. Abuse of missionary children in the PC(USA) 1946–1990

ACKNOWLEDGED

WHAT HAPPENED

Eight women brought charges in Grace Presbytery, Texas, against William Pruitt, a former Presbyterian missionary in the Congo who had become an associate minister in Dallas; he denied them and died in 1999. An independent committee of inquiry set up by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 2000 reported on September 30, 2002 that it had documented 48 incidents of abuse involving 22 girls between 1946 and 1978, at Central School in Lubondai, a boarding school for missionary children, at a mission hostel in Kinshasa and after his return to the United States, and that the true number was probably higher. Mission officials had been told of abuse, and in 1976 he and his wife were reappointed as mission volunteers to the Congo although some of those who approved it knew of the allegations. A second body, the Independent Abuse Review Panel, reported in October 2010 that it had substantiated abuse in 30 cases, mostly against missionaries' children at mission sites in Cameroon, Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Mexico, Pakistan and Thailand between 1950 and 1990, and it publicly named several abusers.

The criticism

Survivors and the 2002 committee itself faulted the church's officials more than its missionaries alone. The committee called the church's earlier response "minimal" and found that "key opportunities were repeatedly missed by church officials"; it recorded eleven confrontations with the abuser in his lifetime, none of which led to repentance or reform. The United Methodist boards that shared the Kinshasa hostel declined to cooperate with the inquiry, citing confidentiality.

Reformed response

The PC(USA) answers that it commissioned and paid for both independent inquiries, opened their findings to the public and named abusers, which the committee said the church was right to do: "it is a grave mistake to assume that truth-telling about abusive behavior will destroy the church." Presenting the 2010 report, its mission leaders offered the victims their "deepest apologies," and Linda Valentine spoke of "great pain, grief, a sense of responsibility." The church offered survivors up to $15,000 each for therapy and spiritual care and held retreats for them.

Was it corrected? Acknowledged. The 2002 committee made 30 recommendations, among them that church officers be required to report any knowledge of child abuse, that anyone found guilty be dismissed from mission service, and that an abuse review panel hear further reports; the Independent Abuse Review Panel's final report followed in 2010. Findings on living accused ministers were referred to their presbyteries; the church's leaders said it was "not an adjudicatory body."

Sources: Presbyterian Outlook, "Changes recommended in handling sexual abuse reports; cases were largely ignored for 40 years" (October 1, 2002); Worldwide Faith News, report of the Independent Committee of Inquiry (October 1, 2002); Presbyterian Outlook, "Thirty cases of abuse, mostly directed at children of Presbyterian missionaries 1950–90, documented by abuse review panel" (October 8, 2010); Presbyterian Outlook, "Independent panel names six physical, sexual abusers of missionary children" (November 14, 2010).