



1850-1868

“The Silver Tongued Orator”

Samuel J. P. Anderson

Almost immediately, the Session began the search for a successor to Rev. Van Court. In August they wrote to Professor J. H. Thornwell of Columbia, South Carolina. Thornwell was a well known theologian whose doctrine of the spiritual church, emphasizing a strict separation of church and state, would greatly influence Presbyterians in the South in the coming decade. Thornwell was much in demand and the Clerk of the Session learned informally “that there was but little prospect of a favorable response.” Even before receiving his formal declination, the Session sent letters to four additional prospects.

By the spring of 1850, “there developed considerable difference of opinion in regard to whom should be called to be Pastor.” Church members petitioned the Session, asking that Rev. J. D. Matthews be invited to speak. The Session declined to do so, citing negotiations already in progress with Dr. N. Murray. Since Dr. Murray had agreed to speak in May,

...it would not only be embarrassing to the Session, but must also disgust one, if not both of the gentlemen named, to find themselves at the same time engaged in what would appear to be an unseemly contest for a vacant charge: and would thus present the degrading spectacle of clergymen descending from their high position to be employed in a low strife canvassing for a situation in a church ordered vacant by the death of its Pastor.

Notwithstanding the Session’s concerns, the call to Dr. Murray was apparently unsuccessful: in June the congregation voted to call Dr. John Leyburn. Leyburn also declined, as did Dr. Robert Breckenridge in September.

In addition to the difficulties it had in finding a new pastor, other signs of stress were evident in the church. Church membership, which had steadily increased since 1844 to a high of 280 in April of 1849, now

declined. The school was dealt a final blow when both teachers hired to replace Miss Calkins in August, 1849, resigned within five months and the Presbytery refused to aid in its funding.

Trouble also arose between the Session and the Board of Trustees over control of the church. The Session minutes for November 18, 1850, records the meeting with the trustees and deacons:

...after considerable conversation, and there being a difference of opinion, a vote was then taken, when it appeared that six were of the belief that the Session ought to have this control, and four that it belonged to the Trustees, there being no probability that a similarity of views would be entertained, the special meeting was then closed.

No resolution was ever noted.

Incidents of church discipline were also increasing. Until this time, only two cases of discipline were recorded. However, on one day in October, 1850, the names of eight members were placed before the Session for disciplinary action. Offenses ranged from neglecting the regular meetings of the church and “sinfully conforming to the world in following its vain amusements” to sundry petty thefts. Some cases were apparently resolved in private meetings between the offending person and two elders. In other cases, attempts at reconciliation and restoration were unsuccessful. J. C. P. Smith, for example, was charged with “attending places of fashionable amusement, engaging in the practice of dancing, playing billiards, and attending the Theatre,” all deemed “inconsistent with the character of a professing christian.” The charge of playing billiards was later replaced by “riding on the Sabbath for pleasure,” which Mr. Smith denied. With regard to the other matters, however, Smith believed them “neither an offense to God or the Church” and signaled his “determination...to persevere in the same.” The Session therefore resolved that “J. C. P. Smith be, and hereby is cut off from the communion and fellowship of the church of Christ.”

In December, 1850, the congregation again met to vote on a pastor. The Session put forth the name of S. J. P. Anderson of Norfolk, Virginia. The same group that had previously opposed a sessional candidate countered with one of their own - Rev. Ruggles, who had served Central as a temporary pastor. Anderson won a majority of the votes and on December 11, 1850, the call was issued:



Dr. Anderson, Central pastor, 1850-1869. A minister of high standing in St. Louis, whose prominent position was "eminently calculated to exert influence in the community." (Quote from fellow pastor, James Paige. Paige testified against Anderson in his trial in 1863.)

The Congregation of the Central Church of Saint Louis, Missouri, being in sufficient grounds, and satisfied of the ministerial qualifications of you, the Rev. Samuel P. Anderson, and having good hopes from information received of your past labours in other fields, that your ministrations in the gospel will be profitable to our spiritual interests, do earnestly call and desire you to undertake the pastoral office in said congregation; promising you, in the discharge of your duty, all proper support, encouragement and obedience in the Lord.

Central offered a \$2,000 annual salary, Anderson accepted and first appears as pastor elect in the Session minutes on January 20, 1851.

Samuel Joseph Pierce Anderson, born in Virginia in 1814, graduated from Union Theological Seminary in Richmond. He served two churches in Virginia for a total of ten years before coming to St. Louis. Years later, after his death, it was recalled that when Dr. Anderson came to Central "he found it numerically and financially weak and sorely afflicted in the death of...its first pastor...; but, by divine blessing upon his attractive pulpit services and his indefatigable pastoral labor, it soon took on vigorous life, and became one of the largest and most influential churches in the State." By all accounts, Dr. Anderson was able to bring the various factions within the church together and Central again began to grow.

Session minutes detail the ebb and flow of ordinary church life. Reflecting its location in a booming western metropolis, Central welcomed new members

By the 1850's, St. Louis had become the major port of the Mississippi River basin above New Orleans, lending credence to Dr. Anderson's prediction that "the valley of the Mississippi would feed the whole world."

("St. Louis Levee, 1853", Daguerreotype by Thomas M. Easterly, Missouri Historical Society)



from northern, eastern and southern states and dismissed others to churches throughout the continent, including California. By 1858 it claimed 391 communicant members and 600 children in its Sabbath school.

There were occasional instances of church discipline (eight cases between 1851 and 1860). Most were for habitually neglecting the ordinances of the church, although one woman was cited for the more serious offense of denying the authority of Scripture and the atonement of Christ.

New elders were elected to replace those who had died or moved away. (Once elected, elders served for life; a rotating system for officers was not introduced until well into the next century.) The congregation was divided into districts and an elder assigned to each to visit the families and see to their spiritual welfare.

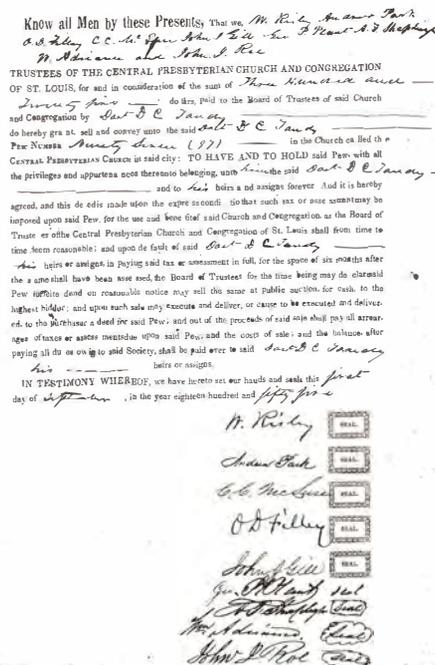
By 1855, Central was selling pews to individuals and assessing yearly taxes on them “for the use and benefit of said Church and Congregation.” Basket collections separately taken for various denominational Boards were abandoned for a time and replaced by a single annual subscription. When the subscriptions began falling off, the old plan was re-established.

The 1883 history of Central characterized these early years under Dr. Anderson as “quiet, happy and prosperous.” Anderson was well respected in both the community and the denomination. He served as moderator of the St. Louis Presbytery and sat on the board of the newly established Lindenwood College for Females. As he explained in a letter, “The daughters of the church have been far too much overlooked in our schemes of education and we all know the community influence of the mothers.” Judging from the eloquence of surviving sermons, his sobriquet “The Silver Tongued Orator” was well deserved.

While Central experienced peaceful growth in the 1850’s, St. Louis underwent more turbulent change. Europeans of varied backgrounds poured into the city. By the end of the decade nearly a third of St. Louisans were German and 60% of the population was foreign born. Clashes between “Americans” and “foreigners” and among various ethnic groups were common. Riots frequently broke out at election time, the most serious occurring in 1854 when a mob swelling to 5,000 wreaked havoc throughout Irish neighborhoods. By the time the riot ended, about seven blocks from Central, ten people lay dead.



O.D. Filley, mayor of St. Louis and Central church officer. (Missouri Historical Society)



Pew ownership, a common practice for building church revenues, was documented by proclamations such as this one, signed by church officers, among them, O. D. Filley, mayor of St. Louis, from 1858-1861.

The foreigners, of course, provided labor for the ever-expanding economy. In one Thanksgiving sermon, Dr. Anderson predicted that the valley of the Mississippi, with its resources properly developed, could feed the whole world and the coal, iron and lead within a few hundred miles of St. Louis could "employ the manufactories of the entire globe." Anderson was careful to ascribe all of these advantages to God. "I know," he said, "much is said of Anglo-saxon blood: but I have far more confidence in Anglo-saxon faith. I believe that the true secret is, that we honor God and that he honors us. But let us forget this; let us once begin to ascribe all to our own wisdom and power, and the magazines of divine wrath will not want means of punishment."

This sermon, delivered in 1851, exemplified the widespread American optimism in its manifest destiny. Yet even then Anderson acknowledged "occasional times of apprehension," times when "coming events cast their shadows before, to darken our dwellings and fill our hearts with dread." By 1860 it was the shadow of slavery that fell across the nation.