

Eschatology in the Bible Presbyterian Church

John A. Battle

One of the distinguishing features of the Bible Presbyterian Church (BPC) has been its adoption and promotion of premillennial eschatology. Most Presbyterian denominations accept the original form of the Westminster Confession of Faith and Westminster Larger Catechism; these present a general resurrection of the dead (agreeable particularly to amillennialism or postmillennialism). Some subscribe to an amended form, which is worded so as to allow all three main views of eschatology (amillennialism, postmillennialism, or premillennialism). However, the BPC at its first Synod in 1938 amended the Westminster standards to present the premillennial view exclusively.

This adoption by the BPC of the premillennial position was the consequence of the historical situation at the church's founding. Subsequently, the church has had to take this position into account in its own policies and ministry. The BPC has held to the premillennial position with varying amounts of strictness. Throughout its history the BPC has experienced the tension between its stated premillennial position and its desire to be a church that welcomes all Bible-believing Presbyterian churches and ministers into its communion.

Some definitions

Here are some brief and simple definitions of terms used in eschatological discussions. There are three main views relating the second coming of Christ to the promised glorious kingdom:

- *Premillennialism*.—At Jesus' second coming the redeemed dead will be resurrected; then there will be a glorious 1000-year kingdom, followed by the resurrection of the rest of the dead and the final judgment.
- *Amillennialism*.—The biblical promises of the glorious 1000-year kingdom are spiritual in nature, and refer to the present age, either the church on earth or the redeemed in heaven. At Jesus' second coming all the dead will be raised in a general resurrection for the final judgment.
- *Postmillennialism*.—The glorious 1000-year kingdom will take place in the future, through the work of the Holy Spirit and the church. Jesus will return after the 1000 years are over, and there will be the general resurrection and judgment of all the dead at that time.

There are also three main views that relate the rapture of the living believers and the resurrection of the righteous dead to the predicted "great tribulation":

- *Pretribulationism*.—This rapture and resurrection will take place in an invisible second coming before a final seven-year tribulation period. Jesus then will return to earth

visibly, at the end of that period. Variations of this view are the *midtribulation* view (the rapture and resurrection of the just will be half way through the seven-year period, with the “great tribulation” of 3½ years following) and the “*pre-wrath*” view (the rapture and resurrection of the just will take place after the beginning of the tribulation period, but before the period of God’s outpoured wrath, closer to the end of the period; this view approaches the posttribulation view).

- *Posttribulationism*.—This rapture and resurrection will take place after a final tribulation period, at the same time that Jesus returns to earth visibly. When combined with premillennialism, this view is often called *historic premillennialism*.
- *Preteritism*.—The predicted “great tribulation” has already occurred, when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in A.D. 70. There is no expected future tribulation period prior to Jesus’ second coming.

There are two primary theological systems that have an impact on one’s view of eschatology:

- *Dispensationalism*.—God has divided history and people into major divisions, with different plans and purposes for each group. This is especially true for Israel and the church, which are two distinct groups, with distinct promises and eschatological programs. Nearly all dispensationalists are premillennial and pretribulationist.
- *Covenant theology*.—God operates through one overarching covenant of grace, which remains constant throughout the various historical dispensations. Israel and the church share the same promises and eschatological program.

Within all these views listed there are variations, and all of them have been held in various degrees by Presbyterian theologians.

The precursor to the Bible Presbyterian Church

J. Gresham Machen was the most prominent conservative Presbyterian leader in the great modernist-fundamentalist struggle within the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (PCUSA).¹ In 1929 he led in the formation of Westminster Theological Seminary near Philadelphia. This seminary produced graduates who were strong supporters of the inerrancy of the Bible and other fundamental Christian doctrines, and who sought to be ordained in the PCUSA. However, some presbyteries of the PCUSA were reluctant to accept Westminster graduates. Later, Westminster became the primary seminary supplying ministers to the new separatist Presbyterian churches.

In 1933 Machen led in the formation of the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions (IBPFM), designed to enable Presbyterians to support doctrinally sound missionaries. The PCUSA reacted with its Mandate of 1934, a declaration demanding that all Presbyterians who belonged to the IBPFM immediately resign from that board and support the official boards of the church. Many obeyed the Mandate and resigned; however, Machen refused to obey the Mandate. Others who stood with him at that time and endured church trials included J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., Harold S. Laird, Charles J. Woodbridge, Paul Wooley, Roy Talmage Brumbaugh, H. McAllister Griffiths, Merrill T. MacPherson, Edwin H. Rian, and Carl McIntire.

In 1935 Machen and others formed the Presbyterian Constitutional Covenant Union (PCCU), pledging to devote themselves to a reformation of the PCUSA, and, failing that, to separate from it and to form a new church that was faithful to Scripture and the constitutional principles of the PCUSA. At that time Machen inaugurated the *Presbyterian Guardian*, a paper devoted to promoting the cause of the PCCU. When Machen and others refused to obey the mandate, they were put on trial and effectively put out of the PCUSA. On June 11, 1936, they met together and, as they had pledged, dissolved the PCCU and formed a new denomination, the Presbyterian Church of America (PC of A; not to be confused with the modern denomination, the PCA—Presbyterian Church in America). Unfortunately, Machen died of pneumonia only about six months later, January 1, 1937. His strong leadership had been able to hold the new church together and set it on its course. Soon thereafter the PCUSA sued the PC of A in court, claiming that the name of the new conservative denomination was too similar to that of the old denomination. The court ruled in favor of the PCUSA, and the PC of A in 1939 changed its name to the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC).

Eschatology and fundamentalism

The events that led to the Presbyterian separation and the formation of the Presbyterian Church of America did not happen in isolation. The modernist-fundamentalist struggle crossed all denominational lines, especially in America. Among professing Christians the two opposite schools of thought and culture had been developing for decades. As liberalism or modernism developed its own theology, leadership, and program, so fundamentalism did likewise.

Fundamentalism in America in the early decades of the twentieth century found Christians from many denominations working together to defend the traditional basic doctrines of Christianity, “the fundamentals.” While Machen himself did not like the name fundamentalist (preferring the simple name Christian), he did state that he shared their historic faith; he had more in common with a “fundamentalist” Baptist than he did with a liberal Presbyterian.²

In America various contributing streams strengthened the fundamentalist movement. One such stream was the general conservatism within the mainline denominations. Presbyterian theologians such as B. B. Warfield defended the inerrancy of Scripture and the basic Christian and reformed teachings. Machen himself fought the liberals in his area of New Testament, demonstrating on a scholarly level that Paul’s religion came from Jesus, not the Greeks, and that Jesus’ birth from the Virgin Mary was an original doctrine in the church based on historical testimony and divine revelation. Robert Dick Wilson performed the same service for the Old Testament, defending its inspiration and truthfulness against liberal attacks. These Presbyterian theologians were not alone. They were joined by many other scholars within the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition, as well as from other Protestant traditions. The many writers who in 1910-1917 contributed to *The Fundamentals*, that first popular manifesto of fundamentalist polemic theology, from which the name “fundamentalist” was derived, represented by-and-large this conservative tradition.

A second stream strengthening the fundamentalist cause was the pietistic movement, especially in England and America. These Bible-believing Christians put a much greater

emphasis on personal Bible study, separation, holiness, and aggressive evangelism. Many organizations were formed to promote this approach, including Bible schools and colleges, mission agencies, and other interdenominational agencies. Frequently these Christians belonged to independent churches, and these agencies were their primary means of broader Christian fellowship. Theologically most of these Christians were dispensational, with a strong belief in the pretribulational, premillennial coming of Christ for his church.³ They were uniformly hostile to modernism; their theological system required verbal inspiration of Scripture, and literal exegesis. As one dispensational scholar said, “You’ll have to look hard to find a liberal dispensationalist.”⁴ The *Scofield Reference Bible*, published in 1909 and 1917, furthered their cause; its editor, C. I. Scofield, had already published his *Scofield Bible Correspondence Course* in 1907. These publications greatly increased the popular acceptance of dispensationalism by conservative Christians.

Within the PCUSA many of the conservative pastors and churches had adopted much of this dispensational theology along with their own conservative Presbyterian doctrines. For example, Lewis Sperry Chafer, founder of the strongly dispensational Dallas Theological Seminary, was a Presbyterian minister. Roy Talmage Brumbaugh taught a large class in the First Presbyterian Church in Tacoma, Washington, using the Scofield curriculum. Donald Grey Barnhouse of the Tenth Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia was a well-known dispensational Bible teacher. Most of these Presbyterians kept their beliefs in Presbyterian church government, infant baptism, and the covenant of grace, but adopted the eschatological scheme of pretribulational premillennialism taught by the dispensationalists. Many of them often pictured themselves as living in a predicted Laodicean Age (Rev 3:14-22), with the apostate liberal churches leading up to the scarlet woman astride the beast (Rev 17). Thus the command to “come out of her, my people” (Rev 18:4) was directly applicable to them—there must be a separation from the PCUSA and any other liberal denomination.

In the minds of many fundamentalists the premillennial coming of Christ was a doctrine so clearly taught by a literal reading of Scripture, that to deny that doctrine was a dangerous compromise with unbelief. Even though many reformed churches and scholars were defending the fundamental doctrines, and received honor from fundamentalists, they still did not go far enough when they did not teach premillennialism. At the same time, many reformed writers were concerned about dispensationalism. In their view, dispensationalism was a dangerous teaching that destroyed the unity of the church and of the Bible, and that led to various other false teachings, such as antinomianism (or its opposite, legalism) and independency. This latter opinion was more common in reformed churches, such as those from the European continent, who had not been influenced by English or American dispensationalism. This included the Christian Reformed Church in America, with roots in Dutch Calvinism.

The tension between these two streams was graphically demonstrated February 4, 1937, when the Philadelphia Fundamentalists organization changed its constitution to include this statement: “We believe in ‘that blessed hope,’ the personal, premillennial and imminent return of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” Up to that time the organization had allowed members to have various eschatological views. Paul Woolley, a member, and himself a historic premillennialist and a faculty member at Westminster Seminary, objected, noting that this would exclude sound fundamentalists from membership. The president, Merrill T. MacPherson,

agreed, but favored the motion anyway. This event was reported negatively in the following issue of the *Presbyterian Guardian*, edited by Ned Stonehouse;⁵ and it was reported positively in the *Christian Beacon*, a paper started in 1936 and edited by Carl McIntire.⁶ These two reactions, each from a member of the new PC of A, illustrate the different approaches to eschatology found in reformed churches and in general American fundamentalism, as well as the tensions in the new church over eschatology.

Eschatological dissent in the PC of A

Dr. Machen, the most prominent leader of the new church (PC of A), had established two independent agencies in his struggles with the liberals and inclusivists in the PCUSA. One was Westminster Theological Seminary and the other was the IBPFM. Although each had its own board of directors, he served as president of the board of both agencies. He invited many other Presbyterians to join him on these boards, representing all the prominent views of eschatology. For example, historic premillennialist Harold S. Laird was appointed secretary of the board of Westminster Seminary at its formation, and continued as such until he resigned in 1937.

Machen himself was amillennial, and he invited several other amillennialists to join the faculty at Westminster Seminary (including President Cornelius VanTil, Oswald T. Allis, John Murray, R. B. Kuiper, and Ned Stonehouse). However, Machen did not consider eschatology to be the major issue, and he also invited premillennialists Paul Woolley and Allan A. MacRae to join the faculty. While Woolley held to historic or posttribulational premillennialism, MacRae favored pretribulational premillennialism, which is often linked to dispensationalism. While some of the faculty at Westminster were trained in America, several came from reformed traditions in Europe, including VanTil and Kuiper from the Christian Reformed Church, and John Murray from the Presbyterian Church in Scotland. While there was eschatological liberty for the faculty at Westminster, it was the amillennial view that was most strongly promoted.⁷

In a similar way, the IBPFM reflected a variety of eschatological positions. However, the premillennial presence on the mission board was stronger than it was on the seminary board. Perhaps the reason for this was that the cause of missions attracted active Presbyterian pastors and laymen, and these people were more influenced by the American fundamentalist movement and its premillennialism. This was especially true of those who favored the separatist position of Machen. Leading up to the time when the PC of A was formed in 1936, there was a crisis on both boards. The Westminster board had members who favored giving in to the PCUSA and resigning from the IBPFM, so that they could remain in the old church. And there were those in the mission board who opposed the separation, or at least the dissolution of the PCCU. There was a danger that one or both of them would repudiate Machen's stand. Machen fought hard to keep both boards loyal to the separatist position; this resulted in many resigning from those boards. But both institutions were saved for the new church. During these struggles some of Machen's strongest supporters on the IBPFM were premillennialists.

However, at the time of Machen's death the new church was quickly dividing into two camps. Several issues were involved, but this article will discuss eschatology in particular. The large majority of the voting delegates to the General Assemblies favored a continuation of the

policy at Westminster Seminary. A vocal minority, however, believed the premillennial position was important and was under attack in the new church. This second group had gained control of the IBPFM, and at its November 1936, meeting had replaced Machen as president with Harold S. Laird, a premillennialist. They also elected Merrill T. MacPherson, a dispensational premillennialist, as vice-president. Both these officers were pastors of independent churches. MacPherson himself was reluctant to join the PC of A because he feared that the new church was too hostile to his theology. To make matters worse, his church constitution renounced any future higher church jurisdiction whatever.

MacPherson's fears were not totally unfounded. There was a continuing war of words between writers in the *Presbyterian Guardian* and the *Christian Beacon* over ecclesiology and eschatology.⁸ Machen himself had assured premillennialists that there was freedom for them in the PC of A, even though their views were opposed to the Westminster standards, since they still held to the "system of doctrine" of the Standards.⁹ However, many of the premillennialists—especially the pretribulationist ones—still were concerned. John Murray and R. B. Kuiper wrote in the *Presbyterian Guardian* from the amillennial perspective. They both said that historic premillennialism was a permissible position in the church, but that dispensationalism was not. And this dispensationalism was often identified with pretribulationism.¹⁰ Some pretribulationists were already in the PC of A (such as MacRae and McIntire), as was J. Oliver Buswell, who held to the midtribulation position. These men were not yet accused in church courts of heresy, but it was feared that such was a possibility. The vehemence of some of the attacks against dispensationalism contributed to the reluctance of some men to join the new church. Looking back, we can see a problem of definitions. It was not clear to all what was meant by dispensationalism, and whether it was identical to pretribulationism. On the other hand, in the mind of some, premillennialism was the same as pretribulationist premillennialism.¹¹

When the second General Assembly of the PC of A met in 1936, it adopted the Westminster Standards, without the 1903 changes, and refused to change the wording of the eschatological parts. Nor did it pass even a resolution guaranteeing eschatological freedom. Premillennialists had hoped that the new church's confession would specifically allow their position. The majority of the Assembly believed that the church already had eschatological freedom, and that it was not necessary to change the church's standards so that premillennialism would be permitted; that view would remain opposed by the standards although allowed in the church. This policy made some premillennialists uncomfortable, with the possibility of future General Assemblies enforcing the confessional standards against them. The majority view would also exclude "dispensational" premillennialists, which many identified with pretribulationist premillennialists.¹²

The conflict between the two factions continued, made more intense by other disagreements as well, including the relation of alcoholic beverages to Christian liberty and the allowance of independency on the mission board. In April 1937, Harold S. Laird resigned from the board of Westminster Seminary, and Allan A. MacRae resigned from its faculty. The creation of Faith Theological Seminary was announced. The seminary was to begin that fall in Wilmington, Delaware, and was to teach the premillennial return of Christ. After the meeting of the IBPFM on May 31, 1937, Paul Woolley and Ned Stonehouse resigned from that board, and Charles J. Woodbridge resigned as general secretary. In all these cases these same issues were

the points of dissention.

By the time the third General Assembly of the PC of A met on June 1, the division seemed inevitable. The most significant action of the Assembly was its refusal to recommend the ministry of the IBPFM and its establishing of a committee to carry on its missionary work. The Assembly also refused to adopt a recommendation of total abstinence from alcoholic beverages. The eschatology issue stayed below the surface in that assembly.

A premillennial Presbyterian church

The evening the General Assembly closed, June 4, 1937, fourteen ministers and three elders gathered and signed the “Articles of Association of the Bible Presbyterian Fellowship.” In this document they “associated” themselves “together in the Bible Presbyterian Synod.” They appointed a committee to receive and organize presbyteries, whose actions would be reviewed at their “next Synod.” They also declared their intent to preserve “the historic position of American Presbyterianism,” apparently referring to total abstinence from alcoholic beverages and to various other precedents and traditions of the PCUSA. Regarding eschatology, it was their purpose to show continuation from the old church by keeping the Westminster standards as they were in the PCUSA in May 1936 (when the initial separation took place), but to “amend these standards in any particular in which the premillennial teaching of the Scriptures may be held to be obscured.”¹³

A committee was appointed to suggest amendments to the church’s constitution, consisting of Carl McIntire, J. U. Selwyn Toms, and H. McAllister Griffiths. When the first General Synod of the Bible Presbyterian Church (BPC) met in September 1938, it adopted the recommended changes. The only changes made in the doctrinal standards were in the Confession of Faith and the Larger Catechism. Many individual parts of the standards were affected. The following changes, made in the Confession, are typical (deletions are lined out; additions are in italics):

Chapter 32, Of the State of Man After Death, and of the Resurrection of the Dead

“2. At the ~~last day~~ *return of the Lord Jesus*, such *living persons* as are found ~~alive~~ *in him* shall not die, but be changed: and all the dead *in Christ* shall be raised up with the self-same bodies, and none other, although with different qualities, which shall be united again to their souls for ever.”

“3. The bodies of the unjust shall, *after Christ has reigned on earth a thousand years* ~~by the power of Christ~~, be raised *by the power of God* to dishonor; ~~the bodies of the just, by his Spirit unto honor, and be made conformable to his own glorious body.~~”

Chapter 33, Of the Last Judgment Things

“1. God hath appointed a day (*which day in Scripture in reference to the last things may represent a period of time including the thousand years following the visible,*

personal and pre-millennial return of Christ) wherein he will judge the world in righteousness by Jesus Christ

Even though the BPC thus became confessionally premillennial, it still intended to exercise eschatological liberty for its member churches and ministers. This intention was clear in the resolution adopted by that Synod:

“WHEREAS this General Synod has adopted changes in the Confession of Faith and the Larger Catechism which bring our doctrinal standards into harmony with the pre-millennial view of that blessed hope, the second coming of our Lord; and

“WHEREAS although we hold this view to be taught in God’s Word, we yet recognize that there are sincere Christians who hold to other views of the events which shall accompany our Lord’s return but who nevertheless are one with us in receiving the system of doctrine taught in the Bible and stated in our doctrinal standards;

“THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that this General Synod declares that subscription to our doctrinal standards upon the part of all office-bearers shall be understood as leaving them and our churches and members free to hold any eschatological view which includes the visible and personal return of our Lord to earth, and which is not otherwise inconsistent with the system of doctrine of the Bible and the Confession of Faith and Catechisms of this Church.”

Thus the situation was reversed from that in the PC of A. In the PC of A the amillennial and postmillennial views were in agreement with the church’s constitution, and the premillennial view was tolerated. Now, in the BPC, the premillennial view was in agreement with the church’s constitution, and the postmillennial and amillennial views were tolerated. This toleration was stated, not only in the resolution, but also by the members of the committee that drafted the changes. H. McAllister Griffiths explained,

While the Bible Presbyterian Church is thus distinctly a premillennial Church, it has not made the ghastly mistake of withholding fellowship or communion from those Christian brethren who have not yet come to see the doctrine, or who may never come to see it—*on earth*. It welcomes into its fellowship and into its ministry those who may hold other views, so long as those views are not contrary to the system of Doctrine of the Bible as it is set forth in the Confession. This is in accord with the great Presbyterian tradition, which has always maintained eschatological freedom.¹⁴

Likewise, Carl McIntire asserted this position—premillennialism with toleration for other views:

It is of historic significance that the Synod took action clearly setting forth the teaching of the Bible concerning the Lord’s return. This is an important doctrine, but it is of a different nature from the issue of the apostasy of our day and the denial of the blood of Christ and the resurrection of Christ on the part of men in the visible Church. In this connection the Synod was careful to recognize the liberty of men to have different views concerning the Lord’s return.¹⁵

This liberty was stated for those who held to the amillennial or postmillennial position. Even more so, there was liberty for various varieties of premillennial belief. Most of the BPC men were pretribulational, but not all. Buswell was midtribulational; Laird was posttribulational. And, of course, there are many variations in other details within the premillennial category. Most, if not all, of the early BPC men were aware of these variations.¹⁶ These varieties of premillennialism were what Griffiths had in mind when he wrote for the committee proposing the changes,

They [the changes] have been made conservatively, without any attempt to go into detail, and in the effort to change the Confession and Larger Catechism as little as possible. The Shorter Catechism needed no amendment. We have tried to frame all the changes so that they will not raise issues about which believers in the premillennial return of our Lord may themselves differ.¹⁷

A careful reading of all the changes made by the first BPC Synod will show that all varieties of premillennialists—pretribulational, midtribulational, and posttribulational—would indeed agree with them. In fact, the most literal reading of the changes would seem to favor the posttribulational position more than the others. For example, Chapter 32 of the Confession, quoted above, mentions only the thousand years of the millennium as taking place between the resurrection of the just and the resurrection of the lost—there is no mention of a seven-year tribulation in that interval, nor anywhere else in the revised Confession.

The explanation given for making the changes to the standards has been consistent. The changes were designed to guarantee the freedom of premillennialists, who had felt threatened or suppressed in the PC of A. They were designed also to attract other premillennialists, who had been holding themselves aloof, into the church. They were not designed to exclude other views.¹⁸

Eschatological development in the BPC

In the beginning years of the denomination most ministers and churches were, with few exceptions, premillennial and pretribulational. Most of the ministers did not consider themselves dispensational, since they held to the covenant of grace, believed in one way of salvation in both major dispensations, and practiced infant baptism. However, a few Bible Presbyterians actually did adopt the dispensational label, and they were not criticized for it.¹⁹ As the Synod moved into the war years, it was active in many other areas, and its membership and agencies grew. With the horrors of the Second World War, the premillennial view became more popular than ever.

When the Collingswood Synod split off from the BPC in 1956, it kept the Bible Presbyterian name, while later (in 1961) the parent body (BPC Columbus Synod) changed its name to the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. The BPC Columbus Synod changed its constitution in 1960 to allow all three major eschatological views, but the BPC Collingswood Synod, and the BPC subsequently, kept the premillennial changes intact.²⁰

After that division the BPC position on the premillennial return of Christ seemed to harden and to become specifically pretribulational. The board of Faith Theological Seminary issued a statement in 1959 stating that it “interpreted the statement that the Seminary was premillennial to mean that the pre-tribulation rapture was in the premillennial view of the return of Christ,” and that the ministers of the Synod are “man for man believers in the pre-tribulation, premillennial return of Christ.”²¹ This declaration probably was prompted by the formation of Covenant Theological Seminary by leaders in the Columbus Synod, including former professors at Faith Theological Seminary. The professors at Covenant, and ministers in the Columbus Synod at large, held various views about the timing of the tribulation.

In the several decades that followed most presbyteries in the BPC required new ministers to be premillennial and even pretribulational.²² It was very unusual for another viewpoint to be found in the church. One such exception was the reception of Dr. Stephen M. Reynolds into the BPC. He was a classic postmillennialist, in the tradition of Hodge and Warfield. He became professor of Old Testament at Faith Seminary and a member of the Philadelphia Presbytery.²³

In 1971 Allan MacRae was removed as president of Faith Seminary by the board because of conflicts over ecclesiastical and academic policy. Dr. MacRae and most of the faculty set up the Biblical School of Theology (later Biblical Theological Seminary), taking most of the student body with them to the new school. Dr. McIntire, chairman of the board of Faith, was himself appointed seminary president at Faith, and a new faculty was formed.²⁴ The new faculty was in some ways more self-consciously reformed. While holding to the eschatological position of the BPC, they taught covenant theology and distinguished their ecclesiology and eschatology from dispensationalism.²⁵ This faculty discovered the original position of the BPC favoring eschatological liberty, and considered the doctrine of the unity of the church under the covenant of grace as more basic and important than the millennial question, and certainly more important than the tribulation question. Men who graduated from Faith Seminary in the 1970s generally shared this position.

Meanwhile, in the Northwest Presbytery there was a new development. The Rev. H. Dennis Leaman, pastor of the BP church in Olympia, Washington, had by his own study changed his position from premillennial pretribulational to amillennial, a position out of accord with the BPC Confession. The presbytery established a committee on eschatology to study the situation and make a recommendation. The committee’s report was adopted in February 1981.²⁶ The report recommended “that the position taken by the First General Synod of the BPC in the said resolution [asserting eschatological liberty] be the position of this Presbytery.” The presbytery then qualified this statement by saying that, since the church standards “teach the pre-millennial view to the exclusion of other views,” the BPC as a whole should “promote” the premillennial view, and that those holding other views should respect that. They concluded:

“We ought not to maintain any position by depending upon ignorance or suppression, but rather we ought to rely upon enlightenment by God’s Word and Spirit to sustain His truth. Further, where these distinctions of position are held, we ought to study to continue working together in mutual love and confidence.”

However, other presbyteries did not yet share this toleration. For example, the New

Jersey – Philadelphia Presbytery was holding up the ordination of three men, two of them graduating from Faith Seminary,²⁷ because their eschatology was not premillennial and pretribulational. The presbytery referred these men to the Faith Seminary faculty to have their views corrected.²⁸

When the Bible Presbyterian Synod met in October 1982, Dr. McIntire and others wanted a resolution passed supporting the pretribulational position of the church. This position had never before been specified in official church documents. The resolution was introduced and passed on the last day of Synod. It stated that the “imminent return of Christ in His Second Coming has been the Blessed Hope of the Bible Presbyterians from the beginning,” and further, “The church will not go through the Tribulation.” The resolution did note the First Synod’s declaration for eschatological liberty, but interpreted it that no one will be disciplined for other views; it did not specify this liberty for new men coming into the church. This liberty “in no way moderates the witness of the church to the imminent, pre-millennial return of Christ, taught in the Holy Scriptures.”²⁹ By “imminent” this statement means pretribulational, since it was believed that the tribulation would be an identifiable event that therefore could not precede the rapture and resurrection of the just. This was the first and the last such declaration from the BPC.

When Dr. McIntire walked out of the BP Synod meeting of 1984 and established his own “continuing Synod,” he was able, as in the earlier divisions in 1937 and 1956, to maintain control of Faith Seminary and the IBPFM. The BP Synod recognized as approved independent agencies the Presbyterian Missionary Union and Western Reformed Seminary. Since that time eschatological liberty for views within premillennialism and even for other millennial views has become more the norm in BP presbyteries. In 1990 the Synod passed a resolution “On Eschatological Liberty” that reaffirmed the original resolution of 1938, stating that eschatology is “a doctrine which [the Synod] has, from the beginning, perceived as not essential to the system of doctrine.” It further asked that this liberty would “not become the occasion of division.”³⁰ In 1996 the BPC went on record opposing dispensationalism. In that resolution it warned against dispensationalism as “egregious error, contrary to Holy Scriptures and against the person and the work of Christ.”³¹

Today the Bible Presbyterian Church is a reformed church that strongly supports covenant theology, and that, as a Synod, holds to the premillennial return of Christ. However, it recognizes that eschatological opinions are not a part of our required system of doctrine, and rejoices to work with churches and ministers who hold to other eschatological beliefs. Those in the BPC who hold to the premillennial return of Christ believe that the best way to promote that view is through Bible study and discussion in an atmosphere of mutual love and confidence, without compulsion or pressure. We can all work together as we wait for “the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.”

¹ The historical information in this and the following sections has been well documented and can be found in various sources. To save space, I do not footnote each detail; questions about specific documentation may be sent to the author. Here are some secondary sources with documentation: Edwin H. Rian, *The Presbyterian Conflict* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1940; reprinted, Philadelphia: The Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1992); Ned B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1954); Lefferts A. Loetscher, *The Broadening Church: A Study of Theological Issues in the Presbyterian Church Since 1869* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1957); *A Brief*

History of the Bible Presbyterian Church and Its Agencies, compiled by Margaret G. Harden (n.p. [Collingswood, New Jersey: Christian Beacon Press], n.d. [ca. 1966]); George P. Hutchinson, *The History Behind the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod* (Cherry Hill, New Jersey: Mack Publishing Company, 1974); *Pressing Toward the Mark: Essays Commemorating Fifty Years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, ed. by Charles G. Dennison and Richard C. Gamble (Philadelphia: The Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1986); Robert K. Churchill, *Lest We Forget: A Personal Reflection on the Formation of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (2nd ed.; [Philadelphia]: The Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1987); Bradley J. Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy: Fundamentalists, Modernists, and Moderates* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); D. G. Hart, *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994); David B. Calhoun, *Princeton Seminary, Volume 2: The Majestic Testimony 1869-1929* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1996).

² Note the evaluation of George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), especially ch. 7, "Understanding J. Gresham Machen," 182-201.

³ This is a main point of Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970).

⁴ Statement made in class at Grace Theological Seminary by professor John C. Whitcomb (1973).

⁵ "Premillennialism Adopted Constitutionally by Philadelphia Fundamentalist Group—Several Premillennialist Members Raise Protests," *The Presbyterian Guardian* 3:214.

⁶ "Fundamentalists Adopt Pre-Mil. View—Philadelphia Body Adopts Resolution with Little Opposition," *Christian Beacon* 2:1 (Feb 11, 1937) 1-2.

⁷ This was the point forcefully made in the letter of resignation of Allan A. MacRae, reproduced in the *Presbyterian Guardian* 4:3 (May 15, 1937) 50, and in the *Christian Beacon* (Apr. 29, 1937) 1-2: "Within the Seminary, teachers in various departments assail the truth of the premillennial return of Christ so that strong pressure is brought to bear upon the students to give up this doctrine. No place whatever is offered in the courses required for graduation for an adequate defense of this doctrine by one who holds it. Every instructor in any department which could properly give any great amount of time to examining the important New Testament evidence regarding premillennialism is hostile to the doctrine. There is no opportunity for giving any comprehensive defense at all comparable to the measure in which it is assailed."

⁸ Especially during the years 1936-1937.

⁹ "Premillennialism," *Presbyterian Guardian* 3:2 (Oct. 24, 1936) 45. There is an excellent recent discussion of this controversy by J. V. Fesko, "The Legacy of Old School Confession Subscription in the OPC," *JETS* 46:4 (Dec. 2003) 673-698, esp. pp. 687-691.

¹⁰ This same position was later expanded at great length by O. T. Allis, who had been one of the early Westminster professors, in *Prophecy and the Church: An Examination of the Claim of Dispensationalists That the Christian Church Interrupts the Kingdom Prophecies to Israel* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1945).

¹¹ This confusion seems to be evident in later statements by Carl McIntire and some of his associates. For example, according to the *Free Press* (Nov. 20, 1959), "The Board of Directors of Faith Theological Seminary . . . declared that it interpreted the statement that the Seminary was premillennial to mean that the pre-tribulation rapture was in the premillennial view of the return of Christ" (quoted in the *Bible Presbyterian Reporter* 5:3 (Mar. 1960) 1. This identification was clearly stated later by McIntire: [writing about Western Reformed Seminary and its president John Battle] "In their printed literature they announce that the seminary is premillennial. But it is a new kind of premillennialism. Our churches over the land have believed that they would not go through the tribulation. Battle, who is president, does believe that the church will go through the dreadful tribulation which Christ said would be worse than anything the world has seen. But since the tribulation will be over at the beginning of the millennium, he calls their seminary premillennial. This view is virtually amillennial as it has these elements in it of the tribulation" (Carl McIntire, mass letter sent "To the Members of Our Bible Presbyterian Church," Oct. 28, 1983, p. 6).

¹² This is still the position of the OPC: "The second Assembly in 1936 declined to declare that historic (nondispensational) premillennialism, along with amillennialism and postmillennialism, was compatible with our church standards. Nonetheless, all three views have been welcome within the OPC" (*What Is the OPC?* [Willow Grove, Penn: The Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2001], 8).

¹³ This document, and the constitutional changes and resolutions related to the founding of the BPC are now available online: <http://bpc.org/synod/minutes/1938.html>. As it worked out, the BPC did not adopt the standards as they were in 1936; the revisions of 1903 were rejected, as they had been by the PC of A, with the exception of an amended Declaratory Statement.

¹⁴ "Impressions of the First General Synod," *Christian Beacon* (Sept. 15, 1938) 1.

¹⁵ “General Synod,” *Christian Beacon* (Sept. 15, 1938) 4.

¹⁶ For example, Allan A. MacRae had written a review of the posttribulational book, *The Approaching Advent of Christ* by Alexander Reese, published in 1932. The review appeared in the *Sunday School Times* of May 7, 1938 (the article is unsigned in the *SST*, but in personal correspondence to me [Aug. 30, 1982] Dr. MacRae confirmed that he was the author of the article).

¹⁷ “Covering Letter on Constitution,” *Christian Beacon* (Aug. 18, 1938) 1, 7.

¹⁸ McIntire, “General Synod,” 4. This was stated later by another BPC founder, J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., “Realized Millennialism,” *Bible Presbyterian Reporter* 5:3 (Mar. 1960) 4. In personal conversations, this reason was given to me on various occasions by Carl McIntire and Allan A. MacRae. Once, in the mid-1970s, I asked Dr. McIntire what he would do if an amillennial OPC minister wanted to join the BPC because of our stand on other issues. His reply was, “Well, I guess we would have to let him come in. But it would cause a lot of trouble!”

¹⁹ For example, BP minister and missionary Arthur J. Dieffenbacher wrote an article, “The Faith of a Dispensationalist” defending that viewpoint and aligning himself with H. A. Ironside and the Scofield Bible. This article was published on the front page of the *Christian Beacon* (Sept. 9, 1937) 1, 8. Dieffenbacher later served as an Army chaplain, and was killed in action in Normandy.

²⁰ Details of this division can be found in Hutchinson, 285-306 (Columbus perspective), and in Harden, 91-100 (Collingswood perspective).

²¹ *Free Press* (Nov. 20, 1959); quoted in the *Bible Presbyterian Reporter* 5:3 (Mar. 1960) 1.

²² This has been the experience of many current Bible Presbyterian ministers when they were seeking ordination, at least up to the early 1980s. For example, when I became the chairman of the Candidates and Credentials Committee of the New Jersey Presbytery (to which Carl McIntire belonged) in 1977, I discovered a policy paper in the committee file that stated that the presbytery had determined some time before that for a ministerial candidate to be licensed by the presbytery, he must be premillennial, and to be ordained, he must be pretribulational.

²³ IBPFM missionaries Dwight Malsbary and Ralph Cunningham were “closet” posttribulational premillennialists (letter of Dwight Malsbary to Robert Anderson [Mar. 19, 1975]; personal conversation with Ralph Cunningham [ca. 1981; Rev. Cunningham recommended several posttribulational books to me, but asked me to keep this information confidential, as it might have made difficulties for him and the IBPFM; he is now with the Lord, and I feel free to mention this]).

²⁴ Dr. Alfred W. Eppard continued as professor of New Testament; he was joined by several younger men, sometimes called “the three B’s”—Barry J. Beitzel, John A. Battle, and Charles J. Butler. Barry Beitzel taught at Faith a short time, and then moved to Trinity Evangelical School of Theology; he now is executive vice president/provost at Trinity International University in Deerfield, Illinois; he was replaced at Faith by Stephen M. Reynolds. Stephen Reynolds and Charles Butler left the faculty in 1976, when the BPC Synod dissolved the Philadelphia Presbytery. Dr. Eppard died suddenly in 1977. John Battle resigned from the faculty in 1982 and moved to Tacoma, Washington, where Western Reformed Seminary was started in 1983.

²⁵ This position is illustrated by the later article of John Battle, “Premillennialism and Covenant Theology,” *WRS Journal* 2:1 (Winter, 1995) 2-6 [available online at http://www.wrs.edu/volume_2-1.htm].

²⁶ *Minutes of the Northwest Presbytery of the BPC* (Feb. 18, 1981).

²⁷ *Minutes of the New Jersey – Philadelphia Presbytery of the BPC* (Jan. 9, 1982, and May 8, 1982). Both these men, R. J. Gore and John C. Wilking, were at that time premillennial and posttribulational.

²⁸ During this same time I was teaching the theology courses at Faith Seminary, and by my own study had come to the posttribulational position, and was therefore an unsuitable agent to assist the presbytery in its efforts. I was promoting the idea of eschatological liberty, but the seminary leadership supported the presbytery’s position. As in 1959, the seminary board equated premillennialism with pretribulationism. I resigned my position at Faith in the summer of 1982.

²⁹ “Resolution 17: The Imminent Return of Christ,” *Minutes of the Forth-Sixth General Synod of the BPC* (Oct. 7-13, 1982), 107-108.

³⁰ *Minutes of the Fifty-Fourth General Synod of the BPC* (Aug. 9-15, 1990), 181.

³¹ *Minutes of the Sixtieth General Synod of the BPC* (Aug. 1-6, 1996), 167.