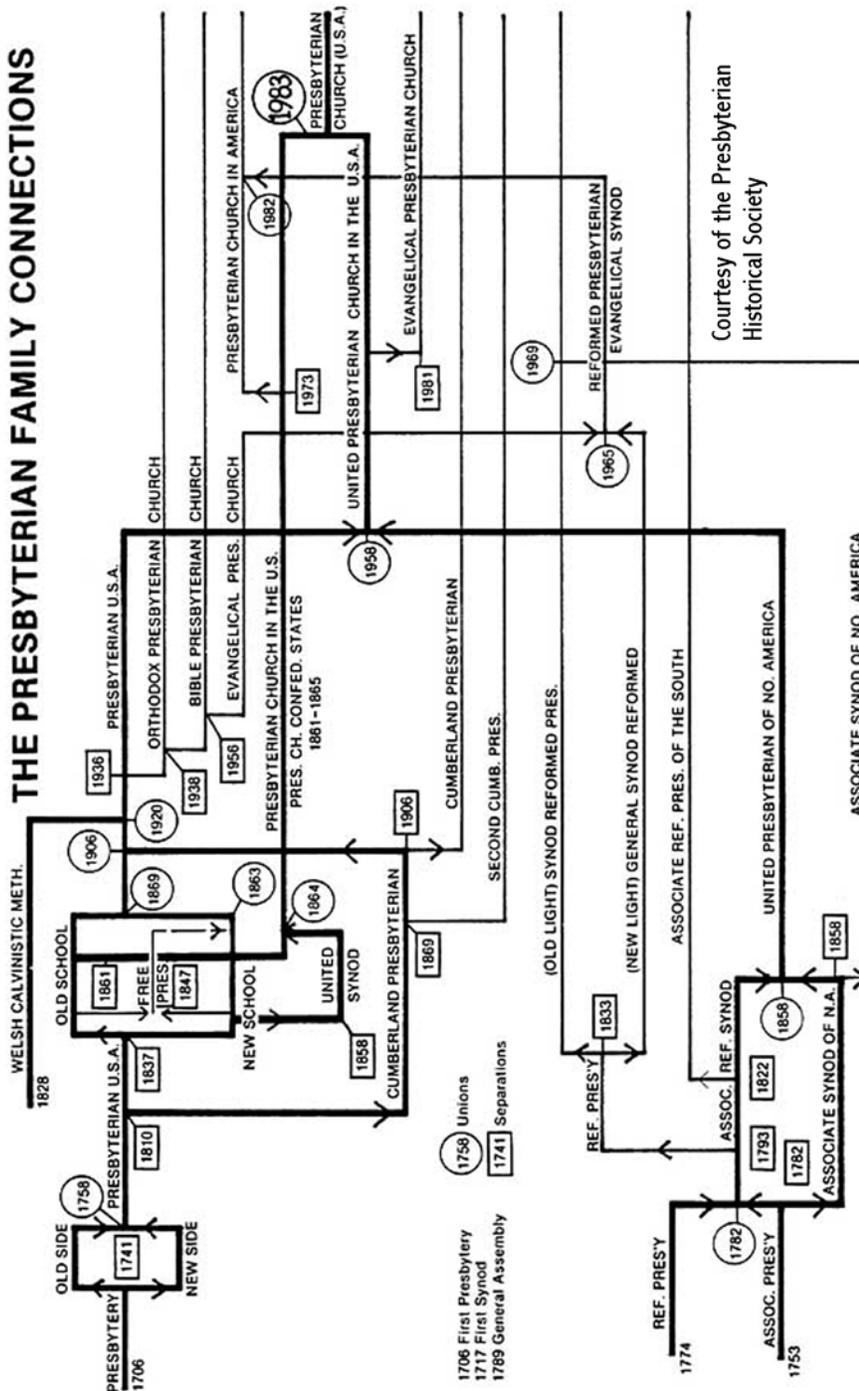


THE PRESBYTERIAN FAMILY CONNECTIONS



Courtesy of the Presbyterian Historical Society

KEYNOTE

**“I WILL SHAKE ALL
NATIONS”:
THE IMPACT OF
PRESBYTERIANISM ON
AMERICA**

G.W.FISHER

During the anniversary of the establishment of the Presbyterian Church in America, it is both proper and prudent that we remember the profound influence Presbyterianism has had on our nation. Its effects on American society began early on in the nation’s history, and continue, we hope, down to this present hour in those Presbyterian bodies that have remained faithful to God’s Word.

Christian History Magazine ran an article several years ago, in its fiftieth issue, entitled, “Preaching the Insurrection.” Harry Stout, the author, made this observation:

Over the span of the colonial era, American ministers delivered approximately 8 million sermons, each lasting one to one-and-a-half hours. The average 70-year-old colonial churchgoer would have listened to some 7,000 sermons in his or her lifetime, totaling nearly 10,000 hours of concentrated listening. This is the number of classroom hours it would take to receive ten separate undergraduate degrees in a modern university, without ever repeating a course!

Events were perceived not from the mundane, human vantage point but from God’s. The vast majority of colonists were Reformed or Calvinist[ic], to whom things were not as they might appear at ground level: all events, no matter how mundane or seemingly random, were parts of a larger pattern of meaning, part of God’s providential design. The outlines of this pattern were contained in Scripture and interpreted by discerning pastors.

Thus colonial audiences learned to perceive themselves not as a ragtag settlement of religious exiles and eccentrics but as God’s special people, planted in the American wilderness to bring light to the Old World left behind.¹

Nowhere was this work more faithfully and regularly carried on than in the Presbyterian churches of colonial America. Presbyterian clergymen could be counted on to bring the truth to bear in the arenas of civil liberty and politics. Their involvement in these issues, and a host of others that encompassed their biblical world view (e.g., education, healthcare, and benevolences), had a long history prior to the influence of Presbyterianism in early America. It stemmed from the conviction that the Word of God requires this kind of stewardship of the believer.

PRESBYTERIANS AND CIVIL LIBERTY

Speaking to the believer’s interest in civil liberty, John Witherspoon, the emi-

nent Presbyterian clergyman and educator stated,

There is not a single instance in history, in which civil liberty was lost, and religious liberty preserved entire. If therefore we yield up our temporal property, we at the same time deliver the conscience to bondage.²

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The cause of liberty as a means to the preservation of religious liberty entered the bloodstream of Presbyterianism at the very outset of its history and has been pumping through it ever since. The man who codified Reformed doctrine, John Calvin, was forced to flee his native France because of his spiritual convictions and the lack of civil and religious liberty that plagued his homeland in the 1500s.

From Calvin and Geneva the stream flowed into the French Huguenot movement, into the national Church of the Netherlands, through John Knox into the life of the people of Scotland. The stream was one commingled of theology and of practice: of theology and a practice very clear

and very logical, very orderly and very closely related to each other.³

The result of this infusion has been that Calvinism in general, and Presbyterianism in particular, has had an influence upon mankind far beyond what might have been expected. This influence was, at least in part, the result of the early struggles of Presbyterians to free themselves from those forces which prohibited them the liberty to worship God according to his Word and their conscience. Writing in the 1800s, the Scottish Covenanter historian Robert Simpson observed,

Our ancestors [the Scottish Presbyterian Covenanters], were eminent alike for their patriotism and their Christianity, and having been so, they have transmitted to us the invaluable boon of freedom, civil and religious. The tree of Liberty, that fair and stately tree that was planted by the hands of a still more remote ancestry, our fathers... watered with their blood, and it has grown, and spread its branches far and wide; and now underneath its goodly boughs it affords a spacious shelter from the scorching heat of persecution and from the storms of tyrannical misrule.⁴

This was the spirit that Presbyterian colonists and settlers brought with them to the New World; and from their footholds on the coast, the Presbyterians moved inland and across America, where their influence was felt in every region.

In 1685 a shipload of Presbyterians landed in Raritan Bay in what was known then as East Jersey. They scattered from

there across the colony and then founded a congregation in 1692.

Eventually they constituted a very important segment of the population, a fact which was to have considerable bearing on the role played by New Jersey during the Revolutionary War.⁵

Most readers of this journal are familiar with the work and ministry of Francis Makemie in New Jersey and Pennsylvania and Samuel Davies in Virginia. Makemie joined with four other Presbyterian ministers to constitute the first American Presbyterian presbytery in 1706. Ten years later the first general synod met in Philadelphia.

By the eve of the War for Independence, one-third of the congregations in New Jersey alone were Presbyterian.

Samuel Davies was born in Delaware in 1723. His story is worthy of an article in itself. As a result of his work in Virginia and its environs, congregations were educated and strengthened in the faith and it is said that most ministers who followed him into the churches he had ministered in, found themselves among a people who tested their theological knowledge and familiarity with the Confession of Faith and its catechisms.

Though he had so many congregations to care for, and his charge was spread over so wide a territory, he had his eye, as far as possible, upon the spiritual needs of all; and none ever wanted for suitable counsel, or consolation, or help, whom his pastoral attentions could reach. And he never considered himself as stepping

aside from his path of duty as a Christian minister, in enlisting vigorously in behalf of his country. In the day of her peril he came up to her help, not as a party-politician, but as a self-sacrificing Christian patriot.⁶

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Samuel Doak was the first resident minister in the territory that would become Tennessee. He came from Davies' same presbytery in Virginia. He came to what was then western Carolina to reach the Presbyterians who had settled there.

The Scotch-Irish had been among the earliest settlers in Tennessee, and with them had come Presbyterianism. A strong and determined people twice expatriated, first from Scotland and later from Ireland, they found America the land of hope. Soon after arriving on the eastern shore of Maryland and the Carolinas, major ports of entry, they moved through the seaboard region to possess the

frontiers of Virginia and the Carolinas.

Living by wit, rifle, and brain in a crude life full of danger, these strong-willed, well-muscled, courageous people established small Presbyterian congregations almost as steadily as they constructed shelters, cleared the fields and wrested a living from the land. Through these congregations, the Presbyterians gave a religious tone to the settlements, and efforts were made to secure ministers to place on a firmer basis and exert a strong moral influence in the communities.⁷

Doak was also Tennessee's first "and most prominent academician."⁸ Samuel Doak was involved in the founding of the first educational institution between the Alleghenies and the Mississippi, Martin Academy, as well as Tusculum and Washington Colleges. Wherever these godly men went their concerns reached beyond the walls of the church, because they perceived themselves to be, based on the teaching of God's Word and tenants of Presbyterian doctrine founded on that Word, Christians living under God in a society, not simply churchmen.

This attitude, ripening in Virginia society, led Robert L. Dabney to write as follows in the 19th century:

Here, then, is our first need, if we should save our country: that we shall carry our citizenship in the kingdom of heaven everywhere, and make it dominate over every public act. And next, the Christians of this country must sternly claim, that

wicked men shall no longer hold the helm of state.⁹

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But the seeds of this attitude really came from another land and an earlier time. The freedom enjoyed by the people of the United States of America owes its existence, in part, to the Presbyterian heritage of Scotland. Sadly, the memory of that reality is slipping away. This blessed connection is fading with the growing trends in contemporary society and the tendency to make generic the specific actions of a very particular group of people.

PRESBYTERIANS AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Not all Christians and not all denominations were engaged in the battle for American liberty and independence, but Presbyterian Christians were. From the pastors and elders, to the teachers, the mothers and fathers—to almost everyone in the pew, Presbyterians were engaged in the fight in one way or another.

The Presbyterian Church was so involved that it became the special object of British hatred and abuse. England charged the Presbyterian congregations

of the middle and lower colonies with seeking to establish a “democratic despotism.”

In his book *Origins of the American Revolution* John C. Miller writes:

To the end, the Churchmen (Anglican clergy), believed that the revolution was a Presbyterian-Congregationalist plot; these bigoted Calvinists, said John Hughes of Pennsylvania, were “ripe for open rebellion, when they poisoned the minds of the people enough” and pulled together “forty thousand cut-throats” to fall upon the Episcopalians. Hughes reported that they were “as adverse to kings, as they were in the days of Cromwell,” and that as early as 1766, some had begun to cry out, “No king but King Jesus.” But their true purpose, he believed, was to form a “Republican Empire in America, being Lords and Masters themselves.”¹⁰

What Hughes failed to see, but Presbyterians knew then and still believe, is that there are, as Andrew Melville said of Scotland, “two kings and two kingdoms”¹¹ in every nation. The supreme authority in any nation is the great Governor of the Nations and all human government falls under that authority as a subordinate tool by which God either blesses or corrects his people and all mankind.

A. A. Hodge, a quintessential Presbyterian theologian, said this:

The present providential Governor of the physical universe and “Ruler among the nations” is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews, to whose will all laws should be con-

formed, and whom all nations and all rulers of men should acknowledge and serve. “Rev. 19:16 And he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS.” The proximate end for which God has ordained magistrates is the promotion of the public good, and the ultimate end is the promotion of His own glory.¹²

So closely was the American Revolution tied to the Presbyterian Church that it was reported in the British Parliament that the “Cousin America” had “run off with a Presbyterian Parson” (meaning John Witherspoon). Even King George referred to the matter as “that Presbyterian Parson’s war.” He said this, in part, because so many of the signers of the Declaration of Independence were graduates of the Presbyterian-founded College of New Jersey, which later would become Princeton University.

Two-hundred and thirty Princeton graduates and students fought in some capacity during the war and many others served in various positions in the civil government. This may seem like a small number, but at the time the College of New Jersey was graduating just 19 men a year compared to Harvard’s 35.

Just how deeply American Presbyterianism affected the infancy of the United States was reflected in the treatment that Presbyterian congregations and churches received at the hands of “Cousin Britain.” Repercussions were not long in coming. “British troops on Long Island burned Witherspoon in effigy and as they marched through New Jersey they singled out the Presbyterian churches for desecration and destruction.”¹³ Some of the

churches were simply burned to the ground, others were looted, and some were turned into jails. On occasion, the pews were chopped up for firewood and the auditoriums used for stables or to store manure.

wife simply because she was a “Presbyterian parson’s bride.”

PRESBYTERIANISM’S CONTINUING IMPACT

So far-reaching and so profound has been the influence of Presbyterianism in our national culture that it even had an impact in what might be termed unlikely places. Take for example this excerpt from a work on the history of United States military uniforms by quartermaster and Congressional Medal of Honor recipient, Captain Oscar Long:

Not long after the commencement of the Revolutionary War and the organization of the American Army, blue became the prescribed color for coats. The reason assigned for the adoption of this color is that it had always been the insignia of the Whigs, the Covenanters having adopted that color from the history of the ancient Israelites, who were enjoined to put upon the fringe of their garments a ribbon of blue.¹⁴

The Presbyterian church has, as a rich part of its heritage, a history of faithfulness to the truth of God’s Word, a biblical system of government that influenced the formation of our own civil government, a sound theology, and a commitment to freedom and liberty, all of which naturally manifests itself in those who, by the grace of God, have had the blessing of seeing these principles and truths preserved among them.

In those Presbyterian circles where biblical principles, the Westminster Confession of Faith, and Scripture itself have all been given up in favor of humanism, socialism, pacifism, and non-judgmentalism, the church has grown

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The Reverend James Caldwell, who is legendary for crying, “Now boys, give them Watts!” while tearing the pages out of his congregation’s hymnbooks so that the American troops would have the wadding they needed for their cannons, was reacting at the moment to the fact that earlier a British soldier had murdered his

impotent and nothing more than another soundless voice preaching in the wind. But where Presbyterians have stood solidly on biblical principles, have maintained the doctrines of the Confession, and hold the Word of God as the only infallible and inerrant rule of faith and practice, they still have an influence beyond their seemingly small numbers and popularity.

John Witherspoon taught a generation of American leaders and served in the Continental Congress. As a Presbyterian leader and a man who helped to shape the nation he taught that

It is in the man of piety and inward principle, that we may expect to find the uncorrupted patriot, the useful citizen, and the invincible soldier,— God grant that in America true religion and civil liberty may be inseparable and that the unjust attempts to destroy the one, may in the issue tend to the support and establishment of both.¹⁵

And we might add to his prayer that God would continue to use the faithful Presbyterian churches of the land to broadcast true faith and to produce men and women of piety and inward principle—uncorrupted patriots and useful citizens. 📖

¹ Harry Stout, “Preaching the Insurrection,” *Christian History Magazine* (April 1996).

² John Witherspoon, “The Dominion of Providence Over the Passions of Men” *Ashbrook Center for Public Affairs at Ashland University, 2006* (Ashland University, 21 Aug, 2006); online at <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/>

[library/index.asp?document=597](http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=597).

³ George Hedley, *The Christian Heritage in America* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1948), 41.

⁴ Robert Simpson, *Traditions of the Covenanters or Gleanings Among the Mountains* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication), 3:8.

⁵ Wallace N. Jamison, *Religion in New Jersey: A Brief History*, Vol. 13 of *The New Jersey Historical Series* (Princeton, N.J.: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc.), 18.

⁶ Howard Griffith, comp., *Sermons of the Rev. Samuel Davies* (Morgan, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1993), 29.

⁷ Herman A. Norton, *Religion in Tennessee 1777-1945* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981), 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁹ Robert L. Dabney, *Discussions* (Harrisonburg, Va.: Sprinkle Publications, 1982), Vol. 2.

¹⁰ John C. Miller, *Origins of the American Revolution* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1943).

¹¹ Thomas McCrie, *The Life of Andrew Melville*.

¹² A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith: A Handbook of Christian Doctrine Expounding the Westminster Confession* (Reprinted; London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1964), 295.

¹³ Jamison, *Religion in New Jersey*, 13:60.

¹⁴ Oscar F. Long, *Changes in the Uniform of the Army 1774-1895* (U.S. Army Quartermaster’s Dept., 1895).

¹⁵ William J. Federer, *America’s God and Country: Encyclopedia of Quotations* (Coppell, Tex.: FAME Publishing, Inc., 1994), 703.

HISTORY

PRESBYTERIANISM IN AMERICA THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

John T. K. Dyck

AMERICA'S FIRST PRESBYTERIANS

God's ways are past finding out. How the gospel is spread throughout the world is a great mystery to human eyes. Often one nation readily receives the Word of God while others reject it very adamantly. Persecution in one nation can result in revival and growth in another. And so a curious working of Providence can be seen in the way that the Presbyterian religion was brought to America. Although about seventy of the Westminster Divines devised a plan to send the gospel to the colonies, Satan appears to have hindered them and nothing was done to implement this plan. Nevertheless God did have a plan for bringing the gospel to the New World.

The Scottish covenanters had a godly concern for sound doctrine and were diligent in catechizing both children and adults. Their strong beliefs resulted in more than a few military conflicts with the King of England. It was their portion, in the providence of God, to lose the Battle of Dunbar in 1650. While they must certainly have wondered at the Lord's purpose in permitting this critical loss, that same Lord decreed that the victorious British general Cromwell should send the captives by shiploads to the plantations in the colonies to be sold. Thus the Lord not only populated the colonies, he did so with men who were strong Calvinists.

These Scottish Presbyterians were joined by disaffected English Puritans and Congregationalists who had also become Calvinists. Jedediah Andrews began preaching in the New World in 1682 and ten years later Francis Makemie joined him. These men earnestly sought to preach the gospel to needy souls and to feed the flock of Christ. The fact that the first presbytery in the colonies was not formed until 1706 indicates their emphasis on preaching and evangelism over mere organization. The fact that they *did* establish a presbytery also indicates that they understood the importance of Biblical church government. The number of Presbyterian ministers had grown to eight men; and Francis Makemie, the father of American Presbyterianism, was instrumental in organizing them into the Presbytery of Philadelphia. Very little is known of the exact date or circumstances of the formation of this historic presbytery, due to the loss of the first page of the minutes book.

Although Makemie appears to have lacked the vigorous personality of John Calvin or John Knox, he was a man of strong convictions. When the governor of New York demanded that he obtain a license to preach, he defied him by conducting a service in the home of a church member with the doors wide open, preaching without the required license. He was later arrested and, at some considerable personal expense, defended his actions in a court of law and was acquitted. This became a significant factor in the establishment of religious liberty in New York.

His evangelistic zeal was evident in his travels throughout the colonies, preaching the gospel and recruiting ministers.

By 1716 the church had grown so that four existing presbyteries were joined to form a General Synod.

THE LOG COLLEGE

In 1718 William Tennent began a modest training school for candidates to the ministry. It came to be known as the Log College. When the evangelist George Whitefield came to America he had a close association with the College, and recorded in his Journal:

The place wherein the young men study now, is in contempt called *The College*. It is a log house, about twenty feet long, and near as many broad; and to me it seemed to resemble the school of the old prophets, for their habitations were mean.. .. All that we can say of most of our universities is, they are glorious without. From this despised place, seven or eight worthy ministers of Jesus have lately been sent forth: more are almost ready to be sent, and the foundation is now laying for the instruction of many others.¹

The College was a fruitful training ground that produced men who were sound in doctrine and warm in their preaching. This rare combination was later blessed of the Lord to bring great revival.

These times were not without controversy, however. Many who were jealous for the sound doctrine of the Scriptures thought that there was too much emphasis placed upon experience. Others who saw the mighty working of God

upon sinful men were of the opinion that the church had succumbed to a deadness that had only an external show of religion.

During this time the diversity of the Presbyterians became more apparent: they included Scottish, Irish, and English elements, each of which was confessional in its composition. However, each of these traditions brought a differing view of subscription to the Confession, often based on experiences brought from the Old World. All were agreed that they would own the Westminster Standards as their confession. But what was to be the nature and extent of their subscription to those standards?

THE ADOPTING ACT

To resolve the difference, an overture was introduced to the Synod of 1728, but, “judging this to be a very important affair, unanimously concluded to defer the consideration of it till the next Synod.”²

In April, 1729 Jedediah Andrews wrote, “We are now likely to fall into a great difference about subscribing the Westminster Confession of Faith.” Someone suggested a formula for subscription. Andrews reported, “The proposal is, that all ministers and intrants should sign it, or be disowned as members.” The Confession itself was not a problem, “but to agree to making it a test of orthodoxy and term of ministerial communion” was not agreeable. In his opinion the lines were drawn very clearly on the matter: “I think all the Scotch are on one side, and all the English and Welsh on the other, to a man.”³

There were other strong sentiments opposing strict subscription to the Confession. Jonathan Dickinson was a strong

Calvinist who had brought his Congregational church into the new synod. He wrote that

the churches of New England have always been non-subscribers, and yet retain their first faith and love. Subscription, therefore, is not necessary to the being or the well-being of a church; unless hatred, variance, emulation, wrath, strife, sedition, and heresies are necessary to that end.⁴

Much of the contention appears to have arisen, on the one hand, out of a concern that the Confession would carry the same weight as the Word of God, and, on the other, the fear that essential doctrines of the Confession would soon be compromised if not protected by strict subscription.

In 1729 the General Synod passed the Adopting Act which brought the two parties together and was passed unanimously. It stated:

Although the synod do not claim or pretend to any authority of imposing our faith upon other men's consciences, but do profess our just dissatisfaction with and abhorrence of such impositions, and do utterly disclaim all legislative power and authority of such impositions, and do utterly disclaim all legislative power and authority in the Church, being willing to receive one another, as Christ has received us to the glory of God, and admit to fellowship in sacred ordinances all such as we have grounds to believe Christ will at last admit to the kingdom of heaven; yet we are undoubtedly obliged to take care that the faith once delivered to the saints

be kept pure and uncorrupt among us, and so hand down to our posterity.

And do therefore agree, that all the Ministers of this Synod, or that shall hereafter be admitted into this Synod, shall declare their agreement in and approbation of the Confession of Faith with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the assembly of Divines at Westminster, as being in all the essential and necessary articles, good forms of sound words and systems of Christian doctrine; and do also adopt the said Confession and Catechisms as the confession of our faith.⁵

The Synod disagreed with certain clauses in the twentieth and twenty-third chapters of the Westminster Confession which gave the magistrate controlling power over the Synod. These were declared to be exceptions to the adoption of the Confession.

Aside from this, other scruples could be declared in order to be judged by the Synod or Presbytery as to their doctrinal integrity:

And in case any Minister of this Synod, or any candidate for the ministry, shall have any scruple with respect to any article or articles of said Confession or Catechisms, he shall at the time of his making said declaration declare his sentiments to the Presbytery or Synod, who shall, notwithstanding, admit him to the exercise of the ministry within our bounds and to ministerial communion if the Synod or Presbytery shall judge his scruple or mistake to be only about

articles not essential and necessary in doctrine, worship or government. But if the Synod or Presbytery shall judge such Ministers or candidates erroneous in essential and necessary articles of faith, the Synod or Presbytery shall declare them incapable of Communion with them.⁶

This compromise document brought peace to the new Church for a few years. Richard Webster records that “no instance of erroneous teaching is known to have occurred until 1735, in the case of Samuel Hemphill.” This young man had been ordained and adopted the Confession. He was a popular speaker and was invited to preach as an assistant to

This incident is referred to at length here because of its similarity to the current promotion in Presbyterian circles of a definition of justification that confuses it with sanctification and makes works a part of justification itself. This error is not new; nor is it only recently that it has been refuted by Presbyterians.

Jedediah Andrews, until many of the congregation became “disgusted with the sentiments he uttered.” Andrews was prepared to bring charges against him for erroneous teaching. A dialogue of his was published in the paper, in which he asks:

Upon the supposition that we all have faith in Christ, as I think we have, where can be the danger of being exhorted to good works? Is virtue heresy?... Will you persecute, silence, and condemn a good preacher for exhorting men to be honest and charitable?... Supposing our fathers tied themselves to the Westminster Confession: why should not a synod in George the Second’s time have as much right to interpret the Scriptures as one that met in Oliver’s time?... If any doctrine there maintained is, or shall be thereafter found to be, not altogether orthodox, why must we be forever confined to that or any other Confession?⁷

Evidence against him was presented in

eight articles, drawn from the sermons he had heard, either impugning or leaving out of view original sin and the blood of Christ, and representing salvation by the merits of Christ, as setting God forth as stern and inexorable. After many delays, Hemphill produced his notes, and the commission declared him erroneous in doctrine, and suspended him.⁸

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THE GREAT AWAKENING

The Log College produced such prominent preachers as Gilbert Tennent and Samuel Blair. Both of these men were influenced by the experiential preaching of the Methodist Calvinist George Whitefield and the Dutch Calvinist Theodorus Frelinghuysen. All these men were associated with the revival of this period called the Great Awakening.

The combination of sound doctrine and a personal call to repentance was blessed in a singular way by the Lord. Many souls were saved, and the power of God was manifest in the preaching of His Word. It was well called the Great Awakening, for it was as if the church had fallen asleep and was gradually coming out of her lethargy and awakening to the power of the Holy Spirit. The preaching searched out sin and pierced the conscience, presenting Christ as the only hope for the sinner.

THE SCHISM OF 1741

The two factions could be identified by their view of revival and subscription to the Confession.

In 1736 the pro-subscriptionist, anti-revival party was in a majority at the meeting of Synod, in part because so many of the Awakeners were carrying on itinerant ministries. The majority seized the opportunity, and modified the Adopting Act to require the adherence to the Westminster Confession without the least variation or alteration.⁹

The revivalist party responded by securing the permission of the synod to form a presbytery along doctrinal lines rather than geographical boundaries. In 1738, they established the New Brunswick presbytery. The following year George Whitefield came to the New World and found affinity with the Tennents and the Log College men.

The Lord prospered the gospel through their preaching, but the rift in the Presbyterian Church was widening. The Log College men came to be known as "The New Side." Although the revivalists saw their work blessed by the saving of many souls, they began to confuse their work with that of the Holy Spirit. Their preaching was soul searching, directed to the conscience, but at times they went too far in telling men what was in their hearts, a work reserved for the Spirit of God. In 1740 Gilbert Tennent preached a scathing sermon in Nottingham called "The Dangers of an Unconverted Ministry," in which he denounced ministers who could not give details of their conversion experience. This led to the Schism of 1741 in which the Synod was severely divided into New Side and Old Side factions. Although Tennent's desire was to produce reformation in the church, he was overly zealous in trying to gain that end.

This tragic breach lasted seventeen years. By that time Gilbert Tennent had come to see that his methods had been divisive, and he was just as zealous to produce reconciliation in the church as he had been to cause the difficulties in the first place. In 1749 he wrote *Irenicum Ecclesiasticum, or a Humble, Impartial Essay upon the Peace of Jerusalem*. He also published a lengthy pamphlet of repentance entitled "The Pacificator," in

which he urged a reuniting of the two parties. In the Synod of 1758 a plan of union was proposed and unanimously agreed to. The first moderator elected by this united Synod was Gilbert Tennent. He died in 1764.

THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

In 1768 a 45 year old minister of the Church of Scotland by the name of John Witherspoon emigrated to the New World with his wife. He became president of the College of New Jersey, which took the place of the Log College and later became Princeton University. He held this post until his death in 1794. His Scottish background naturally made him cautious of England and he soon became a supporter of the American Revolution. He was a popular preacher, a defender of liberty, and the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence.

Because of their understanding of covenant theology and Christian liberty, Presbyterians understood the serious nature of the conflict. The Synod of New York and Philadelphia called for a day of prayer and fasting. They drafted a letter which was supportive of the patriot side, but still expressed loyalty to King George III. In the end, Presbyterian pulpits were unanimous in their support of sovereignty and independence for the American states.

Presbyterians were also very diligent to support the cause of religious liberty in this new nation. Building upon the foundation that Frances Makemie had laid some sixty years earlier in New York, they opposed the establishment of any one religion and endorsed a policy of freedom of religion.

THE FIRST GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

In accordance with the national independence that had been declared and a national identity which was being forged, Presbyterians desired to be organized on a national level. The four existing synods (New York and New Jersey, Philadelphia, Virginia, and the Carolinas), consisting of a total of 16 presbyteries, 177 ministers, and 419 churches, combined in 1789 to take as its official name, "The Presbyterian Church in the United States of America."

The Synod of 1788 had amended the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger Catechism to conform to the new American theory of the separation of church and state. The Directory for Worship was almost completely changed. Ministers to be ordained now had to answer in the affirmative the question: "Do you sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith of this church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures?"

All these measures were adopted by the First General Assembly as it met in May of 1789. John Witherspoon was the convener of this body.

THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

As America entered the nineteenth century, Presbyterians were instrumental in another revival, often called *The Second Great Awakening*. Two prominent men in this work were Archibald Alexander and James McGready. The revival was characterized by "camp meetings," especially in Kentucky. It did not have many of the excesses that were predominant in the First Great Awakening,

and its influence was felt more widely and solidly in its effects. During this time, the way was prepared for Sunday Schools, as well as a stronger emphasis upon home and foreign mission work and the development of colleges and seminaries.

During this time there appears to have been a strong sentiment towards peace and union. Perhaps the church was still thinking of the seventeen years of schism (1741-1758) and recovering from the impact of the Revolutionary War. There was also the positive influence of the revivals of the Second Awakening. Whatever may have been the cause, the Presbyterian Church devised a Plan of Union in 1801 in which a very close working relationship was approved between the Presbyterian and Congregational churches. This plan caused great confusion in both polity and doctrine and resulted in the weakening of the Presbyterian Church.

THE BIBLE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN
LIGHT OF THE FIRST HUNDRED YEARS OF
AMERICAN PRESBYTERIANISM

Where does the Bible Presbyterian Church stand in relation to the events and actions of these first 100 years? The question may seem anachronistic, considering that the BPC was only formed in 1937. Even though our formation is a product of many doctrinal, historical, and even sociological aspects, it is more than just vain speculation to answer the question.

Generally speaking, the Bible Presbyterian Church has been identified with the New Side of the Schism of 1741. That is a good identification because of the heart-felt application of God's Word to the sinner as the only hope for his soul. We desire to be delivered from mere formalism and an external show of religion to

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that Spirit-empowered preaching that touches the heart. We want, not only to preach the truth, but to see the Spirit moving upon the hearts of his elect to excite them to spiritual passion.

At the same time, there is a growing concern for sound doctrine and a faithfulness to the truth of God's Word which was characteristic of the Old Side. We endeavor to warn against compromise and to be separated from unbelief and apostasy.

Although our works have not been perfect before the Lord, do we not desire to have them perfected in Christ Jesus? Shall we not, in the power of his might, have strength so that we will not bear them that are evil, but labor and not faint, and at the same time remember our first love towards him who first loved us?

The Lord has blessed us with ministers who have strong desires for both doctrinal faithfulness and a gospel obedience to his precepts. May the Lord be pleased to make us more and more faithful to our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ.

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¹Archibald Alexander, *The Log College* (reprinted; London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1968), 12.

²*Minutes, 1728*; cited by Samuel J. Baird, *Digest of the Acts and Deliverances of Assembly* [<http://www.pcahistory.org/documents/subscriptions/adoptingact.html>].

³Richard Webster, *A History of the Presbyterian Church in America, from Its Origin until the Year 1760* (Philadelphia: J. M. Wilson, 1857), 105.

⁴*Ibid*, 107.

⁵*Minutes, 1728*.

⁶*Ibid*.

⁷Webster, *History*, 110.

⁸*Ibid*.

⁹Robert T. Handy, *A History of the Churches in the United States and Canada* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 81.

PRESBYTERIANISM IN AMERICA THE NINETEENTH CENTURY: THE FORMATIVE YEARS

Christopher K. Lensch

INTRODUCTION

Presbyterians in America organized on a national level at the same time the U.S. Constitution was being hammered out in Philadelphia. The Presbyterian Church was popular for its having championed the cause of American independence. It had strong national leaders like John Witherspoon and William Graham. It now had a Book of Church Order to go with the Westminster Standards to guide it into the future. The Presbyterian Church U.S.A. was riding high as it commenced its historical journey in tandem with the new nation.

The beginning of the 1800s brought opportunities and challenges, many of which were unique to the American experience. This century saw a time of expansion and external cooperation in Presbyterianism, followed by a period of fracture and reunion. These trends paralleled and were influenced by national dynamics of westward expansion and growing sectionalism within the nation. The parallel pattern between church and state continued after the American Civil War when the mother Presbyterian church in the northern states reunited and went through a period of preserving its ecclesiastical heritage.

EARLY PRESBYTERIAN SEMINARIES

At the beginning of the Presbyterian journey there was no approved school for training future leaders. Archibald

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Alexander, a graduate of one of the several colonial “Log Colleges,” was a leading voice of the late 1700s in calling for an American Presbyterian seminary to meet the demand of planting churches for the growing nation. The national assembly authorized a central seminary that would finally settle at Princeton, New Jersey, in 1812; and Union Theological Seminary of Virginia opened its doors in the same year. These schools were crucial for training the church’s servants in a uniform understanding of biblical Presbyterianism.

American Presbyterian seminaries, as centers of learning and reflection, also played an important role in combating American heresies and experimental excesses that came with American libertarianism. Battles with heresy always sharpen the expression of orthodoxy, and the humanism battering at the door of the 19th century church forced orthodox theologians to articulate a biblical response. The anti-supernaturalism of the period, the mushrooming cults, the attempted dilution of the Reformation doctrines, the divisive issue of slavery, and a host of other “isms” made the 1800s a very formative period in shaping American Presbyterianism.

Princeton Seminary was the flagship in articulating and defending Reformed orthodoxy through academic instruction and engagement of the issues in its scholarly journal.¹ Historians suggest that Professor Charles Hodge bore monumental influence on 19th century American culture by training in the course of his career more than 2,200 Christian servants, many of whom served as influential community leaders. Before its reorganization in 1929, Old Princeton would impress its Reformed theology on more than 7,000 Christian leaders.²

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EXPANSION

The development of several generations over a century can make a difference in the shape and direction of the visible church. At the end of the 19th century, the northern and southern Presbyterian denominations were well-established and respectable, but no longer were they the majority voice in evangelical Christianity. A hundred years of explosive expansion of Baptists and Methodists on the old frontiers had pushed America’s second largest denomination in 1800 into a distant third by 1900.³

At the beginning of the 1800s Presbyterians were well positioned to grow with America. Geographically, Presbyterianism was already poised on the frontiers to plant and organize new churches. Before the Revolution the hardy Scots-Irish had already crossed the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia and the Appalachians in Pennsylvania. Not everyone on the frontier had religion, but the Scots-Irish as an ethnic group were quite loyal to the faith of their fathers. They were interested in freedom of conscience as much as in political freedom, and their population centers served as forward operating bases for Presbyterian home missions on the burgeoning frontiers of the early 1800s.

A challenge to all organized churches at the end of the 1700s was a universal coldness toward religion. The Age of Reason, at its high-water point, had just found its logical climax in the noxious excesses of the French Revolution. Infidelity was rife, even in an America that had been settled by Puritans and other religious dissidents seek-

ing religious freedom. The siren song of humanism was calling from Europe. One observer of American Presbyterian history observed, "If French infidelity had been able to maintain a stable and quiet government in Europe, it would have nigh obliterated Christianity in this country."⁴

Evangelical church leaders were concerned about the spiritual temper of the era. Some presbyteries dedicated the first Tuesday of the quarter to beseech God's quickening hand in behalf of the nation and their communities. On the frontiers, especially in Kentucky, weekly fasts were observed by the faithful.

1801 PLAN OF UNION

The crying need for new churches on the frontier, plus the common threat of public unbelief and godlessness, mobilized the Presbyterians and Congregationalists to work in concert in promoting the true faith. These two denominations had worked actively for American independence, and survived the struggle for nationhood as the two largest churches at the end of the Revolutionary War. In 1801 these two leading denominations, already akin through their Reformation roots and in their theological stance, laid aside differences of polity to cooperate in the noble ideal of planting evangelical churches on the frontier.

The elements of the "1801 Plan of Union" allowed small frontier churches to belong to both denominations at the same time. When questions arose, a right of appeal could be made to either the local Congregational council or to the regional presbytery, depending on which was most practicable. These split-image congregations could call either a Presbyterian or a Congregational pastor.

Numerically, this innovation worked to the advantage of Presbyterians, who were better organized regionally and who were more assertive in their particular convictions. Pastors on an often volatile frontier liked the protections afforded by a presbytery, and isolated congregations of Christians liked the sense of larger unity in the always lonely wilderness.

The challenge for Presbyterians, which ultimately would lead to shelving the plan before it destroyed them, was a serious doctrinal infection. The disease, called New Haven Theology, began to spread in the late 1820s from the bastion of Congregationalism, Yale University. Theology professor, Nathaniel Taylor, was denying the doctrine of original sin.

Historians have posited that Taylor was working out his doctrine of sin from within a framework of Scottish Common Sense Realism.⁵ Empirically, Taylor could not detect sin in new-born children, nor could he reasonably justify the guilt of parents being passed on to their children. He concluded that "sin is not necessary, but it is inevitable."

This heretical departure from biblical anthropology comported well with the rugged individualism of the American frontier and with the revivalistic appeals of the likes of Charles Finney for the individual to lay aside his sin and turn over a new leaf. However, to deny original sin is to deny the biblical teaching of the inherent sin nature in humans.⁶ To deny original guilt is to deny the legal (i.e., covenantal) unity of the race and the federal headship of Adam, leading to the denial of the federal headship of Christ in his mediation of our salvation. A departure

from the orthodox doctrine of sin inevitably diminishes the offensiveness of sin, making it easier for souls to save themselves apart from God's mercy.

Bootstrap religion and "easy believism" in some revival campaigns were the natural results of this infection invading the body of Presbyterians. The theological infection came via a transfusion tainted with an auto-immune disorder within Congregationalism. Originally intended as a neo-natal hospital to help birth and nurture new churches, the 1801 Plan of Union unwittingly was spreading disease.

The danger became apparent by the late 1820s. By then the Plan was being administered by a para church agency, the American Home Missionary Society, making it difficult for Presbyterians to change the terms of the Plan. Also, the new western churches established under the Plan, now quite numerous and leveraging significant ecclesiastical clout, were not in favor of tinkering with the Plan of 1801.

THE OLD SCHOOL – NEW SCHOOL DIVISION

Before the PCUSA split into two camps in the 1830s, there were harbingers of a coming divorce. The Second Great Awakening in the western territories was sweeping many souls into the church. Some of the revivals were led by faithful evangelists like Nettleton in the north, and Rice and McGready in the old Southwest. Other on-going revival efforts were of a more Arminian nature.

One of the challenges to Presbyterians was supplying enough trained pastors for the proliferating number of new congregations. The classical method of

training necessitated several years of preparation for each ministerial candidate. This in itself placed the expansion of Presbyterian churches at a disadvantage to other groups. Thereupon Presbyterian ministers had to be called and installed, whereas Methodist pastors were sent, and Baptists simply came on their own.

To meet the demand for leaders, the Synod of Kentucky experimented with a Methodist approach of using laymen as exhorters and then evangelists. Many were put on a fast track to ordination. While there were gifted men among them, many showed more enthusiasm than discretion. A party within the synod began to claim that the Calvinism of the Westminster Confession was fatalistic, and some ministerial candidates expressed that particular scruple when taking ordination vows.

Realizing that a majority of men in the Cumberland Presbytery were in favor of "new measures" in revival work but against the system of doctrine of the Confession of Faith, conservatives in the Kentucky Synod took drastic measures to undo what they had spawned. Holding the majority, they dissolved the Cumberland Presbytery in 1806 and gerrymandered the rest of the boundaries of the presbyteries in order to make sure the anti-creedalists were in the minority in each presbytery. This action led to the establishment of a separate Cumberland Presbyterian Church by 1810.

While the Arminian proclivities of the revivalists in Kentucky were more overt than in other western synods,⁷ the same ecclesiastical challenges were cropping up in new churches growing out of the 1801 Plan of Union. The end result would be

the same as in Kentucky—the dissolution of church courts. Eighteenth century Presbyterians, all orthodox in doctrine, divided between Old Side and New Side. In the 19th century Presbyterians went beyond disagreement over practice; vital doctrinal issues (e.g., the extent of human depravity, the decrees and providence of God) split the wings of the church into Old School and New School. The New School was known for its catholic outlook and its evangelistic and ethical emphases. The Old School remained Reformed in outlook with confessional and doctrinal emphases. Further polarization ensued from a policy of “elective affinity,” whereby churches or ministers could elect to join a presbytery of either School that overlapped its geographic region.

The ultimate divorce in 1837 was drastic: a slim Old School majority of the national assembly of the PCUSA dissolved four synods encompassing 28 presbyteries. Sixty thousand members and 509 ministers who had become Presbyterian under the 1801 Plan of Union were excised from the denomination. Old School sentiment was, “We do no man injustice by declaring that Congregationalists are not Presbyterians.”⁸

The New School wing was caught by surprise. Its leaders did not have a plan of response.⁹ Civil trials followed to no avail, one going all the way to Pennsylvania’s Supreme Court. Old Schoolers appealed to presbyteries and congregations with sincere Presbyterian sympathies to reapply for membership. On the other side, Congregational associations and newspapers were inviting disenfranchised New Schoolers to come back to the freedom of Congregationalism’s independency.

Chastened by the bitter divorce, New Schoolers did some serious soul-searching as they hung together,¹⁰ claiming to be the true PCUSA.

FURTHER NORTH-SOUTH DIVISION

The Old School–New School split is a salutary example that “doctrine divides.” This was a necessary division that ultimately was healthy for both sides. While irreconcilable beliefs and practices were the wedge between the two schools, national sectionalism growing out of the 1830s would bring further ecclesiastical division by the time of the Civil War. Not one major American denomination was left united through that crisis.

The New School had a penchant for social activism. Its pronouncements against slavery and threats against churchmen holding slaves finally alienated twenty-one New School presbyteries in the decade before the War. These southern and border state churches became the United Synod of the Presbyterian Church and would later merge with the Old School Presbyterian Church of the Confederate States of America.

The latter body organized in the months following the beginning of the War. When the PCUSA had split in 1837, the Old School was about 55% of the original membership. In 1861 it lost about a third of its membership that was below the Mason-Dixon Line.¹¹ Included in that loss were some of the brightest theological and ecclesiastical stars in the history of American Presbyterianism.¹²

REUNION OF THE TWO SCHOOLS

The two schools in the South reunited in 1864. Over the objections of another prominent Old School leader, B. M.

Palmer, Robert Dabney led the campaign to form a stronger Presbyterian church in the South.¹³ New School pastors and churches were admitted into the PCCSA on the basis of subscription to the Westminster Standards.

Respected voices urged caution about running back to the marriage altar. Charles Hodge knew the issues that had divided the PCUSA.... Hodge would not make accusations of heresy, but he cautioned that the New School's most telling weakness was its *tolerance* of beliefs and practice that were less than orthodox.

After the War the Southern church updated its name to the Presbyterian Church U.S. Quite a few Presbyterian churches in the border states affiliated with the PCUS in reaction against ecclesiastical carpet-bagging from the North. Still on the rolls of the PCUSA, Southern

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churches were given a mandate by that body's 1865 General Assembly to confess the sins of slavery and secession. The deathblow was the assembly's designation of the South as a "mission field." Not surprisingly, a hallmark of Southern Presbyterianism became its insistence on the spiritual nature of the church.

In the North the Old School's major loss of the Southern churches had reduced this branch in size to that of the northern New School. That fact, combined with cooperative mission efforts between the two sides that were spawned by the exigencies of war or the opportunities of post-war reconstruction, got the two sides dialoguing. With a whole new generation of leaders on both sides since the rift of the 1830s, and in a new era that had been leveled by a devastating war, it was almost a foregone conclusion that the Old and New School of the North would test the waters for possible reunion.

Despite the precedent of an amicable reunion out of the Old Side-New Side controversy in the preceding century, respected voices urged caution about running back to the marriage altar. Charles Hodge knew the issues that had divided the PCUSA. The New School had examined and policed itself in the former areas of theological aberration. Hodge would not make accusations of heresy, but he cautioned that the New School's most telling weakness was its *tolerance* of beliefs and practice that were less than orthodox.¹⁴

A National Presbyterian Union Convention in 1867, promoted especially by laymen, found little resistance. This helped set the stage for a joint meeting of Old and New School assemblies in 1869. Com-

missioners of opposing camps met on opposite sides of the street in Pittsburgh and met in the middle of the road to shake hands. After a communion service and a vote to ask all the represented presbyteries to bless the reunion, the Old School moderator adjourned the joint meeting, pronouncing, "Whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder!" The united northern PCUSA met the next year in Albert Barnes' church in Philadelphia.

CHALLENGES FROM UNBELIEF AND OPTIMISM

The reunited Northern church had a broader base, but it still had in the Westminster Standards a precise expression of Christian doctrine and practice. As the church faced the temptations across the threshold of the modern era, this creed would serve as the touchstone to measure Christian orthodoxy. Churchmen with little respect for Westminster's timeless value would either ignore its truths or else try to change its substance. Despite the newly injected attitude of tolerance, the PCUSA of the late 1800s did respond to vigilant leaders who were "valiant for the truth."

There had been efforts at internal house-keeping in the ante-bellum years. Ecclesiastical trials had been initiated against notable pastors or teachers, the most-celebrated being Albert Barnes, who was finally acquitted of charges of Pelagianism by the General Assembly in 1836.

The theological aberrations in the first part of the century generally were rooted in overly optimistic views of human nature. In the late 1800s a new heresy arose. The attack was directly against the Bible itself. Higher criticism had come

of age, and now scholars were challenging the inerrancy of the Bible, as well as the very authority of the Bible as God's special revelation.

Convulsions from higher criticism entered the PCUSA, not surprisingly, from seminaries established before the War by the New School. Henry Preserved Smith and Arthur C. McGiffert of Lane Seminary in Cincinnati both changed their ecclesiastical affiliation to avoid separate indictments of heresy; they ultimately found refuge at Union Seminary in New York City. By that time, Union Seminary had declared itself independent of the mother denomination, ostensibly to free itself from denominational wranglings, but in reality to protect and hold its premier professor of Hebrew, Charles Augustus Briggs.

Hebrew students everywhere appreciate Briggs's contribution to the masterful revision of Gesenius's Hebrew lexicon (he is the final *B* in *BDB*). Bible-believing Presbyterians, however, view Briggs as the father of modern heresies, much like Marcion was to the early church, because he undercut the authority and reliability of the Bible as God's revelation to man. A harbinger of the modern era and a prophet of still distant post-modernism, Briggs claimed that besides Scripture, God also speaks through the church and through human reason.¹⁵ He attacked Westminster's doctrines of the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible as obstacles that keep thinking men from coming to God. He called reverence for the Bible and its authority, "bibliolatry."

In the face of theological modernism the General Assembly in the early 1880s had issued a series of warnings, especially to seminary professors, to guard against

any errors that questioned the divine origin and plenary inspiration of the Scriptures. Briggs, a self-styled church reformer, should not have been surprised when heresy charges were filed against him by his presbytery. The judicial process was protracted, but upon his conviction in 1893, Briggs became Episcopalian and Union Seminary became independent.

With regard to efforts to broaden the creed of the PCUSA, the liberalizing cause was not helped by the outspoken support of the likes of Professor Briggs. Many churchmen viewed the Westminster Confession as rigid theologically and socially arcane and out of touch with the modern age. Briggs expressed the sentiment of many: “These definitions [of Westminster] have ever been regarded as hard and offensive, and . . . they have kept multitudes from uniting with the Presbyterian Church.”¹⁶ Briggs called for a “new reformation” grounded in modern scientific methods that would lead the church beyond the scholasticism of 17th century England¹⁷ and prepare the way for broader church alliances. While many Presbyterians of the age wanted to expand and qualify the doctrines of Westminster, Briggs wanted a brand new ecumenical creed. His colleague at Union Seminary, Philip Schaff, pronounced, “The old Calvinism is fast dying out. . . . We need a theology and confession that will prepare the way for the great work of the future—the reunion of Christendom in the creed of Christ.”¹⁸

The campaign to revise the Westminster Standards got traction in 1889 when fifteen presbyteries overtured the General Assembly to review and revise the church’s creed. At stake was a

vision to reunite with other lost sheep of Presbyterianism, particularly the Cumberland Presbyterian Church.

The General Assembly proposed revisions to the Westminster Standards, and these were forwarded to the presbyteries for ratification at the same time that the celebrated revisionist, Charles Briggs, was on trial for heresy. The proposed revisions failed for lack of a super-majority among the presbyteries. Revision of the Confession would await a second attempt in the early 20th century.

A TIMELESS WARNING

The General Assembly met in Portland, Oregon, in 1892. Modern innovations in communication and travel enabled commissioners to make the trip to the West Coast, where a recent frontier civilization had blossomed into a modern city. The development of Portland and of the West seemed to hold promise for limitless progress.

Hope springs eternal, but there were cankers nibbling at the vitals of the mother church. Many leaders were justifiably concerned about their own theologians trying to redefine the Christian faith. Were she to maintain her historic Christian identity in an age flirting with theories of evolution and when society appeared to be progressing through human innovation, the PCUSA would have to make crystal clear her utter dependence upon the Bible with her intention to follow the faith solely laid out in the Scriptures. The Portland Assembly of 1892 rendered just such a determination in this profound statement, called the Portland Deliverance:

The General Assembly would remind all under its care that it is a funda-

mental doctrine that the Old and New Testaments are the inspired and infallible Word of God. Our Church holds that the inspired Word, as it came from God, is without error. The assertion of the contrary cannot but shake the confidence of the people in the sacred Books. All who enter office in our Church solemnly profess to receive them as the only infallible rule of faith and practice. If they change their belief on this point, Christian honor demands that they should withdraw from our ministry. They have no right to use the pulpit or the chair of the professor for the dissemination of their errors until they are dealt with by the slow process of discipline. But if any do so act, their Presbyteries should speedily interpose, and deal with them for violation of ordination vows.¹⁹

Thirty years later, when the cankers were turning into full-blown cancer, the thesis of this Deliverance became the argument of J. Gresham Machen's *Christianity and Liberalism*: rationalist liberals should be honest that they are not true Christians in the historic sense of having hope in the supernatural God who grants life and salvation through Christ alone. One would think that churchmen, of all people, should be honest. Those who reject the message of God's particular grace and his special revelation through the Bible should depart to found their own universalistic religion.

CONCLUSION

Despite struggles, the PCUSA ended the 19th century better than it began the 20th century. Historic Presbyterianism prevailed because of the vigilance of a few and because of the safeguard in the re-

quirement of a super-majority to make constitutional changes. However, in the first decade of the new century the denomination actually did revise and enlarge the Westminster Standards. They did merge with a majority of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, traditionally Arminian in outlook. They did help launch and lead the socialist Federal Council of Christian Churches.²⁰

Despite modern trends or advances in technology, the need of the human soul will always remain the same. The gospel message of salvation by grace alone is the sinner's only hope, and the God of the Bible is the only true God.

There are lessons from the Presbyterian Church of the 1800s. The first principle for Presbyterians who want to be biblical Christians is to work and fellowship only with Presbyterians who embrace the Westminster Standards and who will hold their church officers to their ordination vows.²¹ That is the timeless message from history. 📖

¹ *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review*.

² Church historians Mark Noll and Peter Wallace are cited by Sean Lucas, *On Being Presbyterian: Our Beliefs, Practices, and Stories* (2006), 193, 199.

³ By 1900 the Methodist and Baptist churches together outnumbered Presbyterian churches by a proportion of 20 to 3.

⁴ George Hays, *Presbyterians: A Popular Narrative of their Origin, Progress, Doctrines, and Achievements* (1892), 139.

⁵ Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (2004), 420.

⁶ Ps 51:5; Gen 6:5, 12; Rom 5:12, 15.

⁷ Other anti-Reformed denominations were started by Presbyterians in this era: the Stonites (Christian Church) and the Campbellites (Disciples of Christ), eventually uniting in 1832.

⁸ Cited in *The Presbyterian Enterprise* (1956), 164.

⁹ Disenfranchised leaders gathered at a New School seminary in upstate New York to protest their orthodoxy in view of the sixteen charges leveled against them by the General Assembly. Less than a century later the modernist wing of the PCUSA gathered at the same seminary to decry the assembly's mandate of subscription to certain minimum requirements for ordination. This so-called Auburn Affirmation of 1924 branded the "five fundamentals" of the faith as "theories."

¹⁰ Without a name change over 33 years and despite civil decisions against them, the four synods of the New School claimed to be the true PCUSA until the reunion.

¹¹ The departure of southern Old School members was sealed by the famous "Gardiner Spring Resolutions" passed by the assembly in May 1861, mandating that pastors and members swear allegiance to the federal government.

¹² Leading lights were Thornwell out of Columbia, SC; Dabney of Hampden-Sydney, VA; Palmer of New Orleans; and Girardeau of Charleston.

¹³ Dabney taught at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia and had served as a chaplain under Stonewall Jackson.

¹⁴ The New School's broad level of tolerance fit with its catholic self-identity. Cross-denominational efforts in evangelism and in fighting social ills are a modern manifestation of this blind tolerance, found mainly in New Evan-

gelical churches. Old Schoolers would insist on militancy in promoting the truth of God's holiness and the purity of the church, lest blind cooperation with humanist-tainted methods sow the seeds of a church's own demise.

¹⁵ C. A. Briggs, *The Authority of the Holy Scripture* (1891), 23.

¹⁶ Briggs, *Whither: A Theological Question for the Time* (1889), 98.

¹⁷ Briggs's indictment against the scholasticism of the Westminster Canons was also a slap against Princeton Seminary, which had preserved and promoted the Westminster Confession as the best expression of the Reformed faith.

¹⁸ Cited in George Hutchinson, *History Behind the RPCES* (1974), 160.

¹⁹ Cited in Hutchinson, *History Behind the RPCES*, 164-165.

²⁰ William Roberts, the long-standing stated clerk of the PCUSA, helped guide the founding of the FCCC and was its first president in 1908. See "Roberts Rules of Order" in chapter 6 of Gary North's *Crossed Fingers: How the Liberals Captured the Presbyterian Church* (1996), 349-350.

²¹ At its 2006 General Assembly, the PCUSA determined that candidates for ordination could express scruples of reservation against a policy of celibacy for single pastors (whether homosexual or heterosexual). This decision, in effect, allows the individual candidate to overrule church policy.

**PRESBYTERIANISM IN
AMERICA
THE TWENTIETH CENTURY**

JOHN A. BATTLE

The final third century of Presbyterianism in America has witnessed the collapse of the mainline Presbyterian churches into liberalism and decline, the emergence of a number of smaller, conservative denominations and agencies, and a renewed interest in Reformed theology throughout the evangelical world. The history of Presbyterianism in the twentieth century is very complex, with certain themes running through the entire century along with new and radical developments.

Looking back over the last hundred years from a biblical perspective, one can see three major periods, characterized by different stages of development or decline. The entire period begins with the Presbyterian Church being overwhelmingly conservative, and united theologically, and ends with the same church being largely liberal and fragmented, with several conservative defections. I have chosen two dates during the century as marking these watershed changes in the Presbyterian Church: (1) the issuing of the 1934 mandate requiring J. Gresham Machen and others to support the church's official Board of Foreign Missions, and (2) the adoption of the Confession of 1967.

THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH MOVES TO A
NEW GOSPEL (1900-1934)

At the beginning of the century

When the twentieth century opened, the Presbyterians in America were largely contained in the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. (PCUSA, the Northern church) and the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. (PCUS, the Southern church). There were a few smaller Presbyterian denominations, such as the pro-Arminian Cumberland Presbyterian Church and several Scottish Presbyterian bodies, including the United Presbyterian Church of North America and various other branches of the older Associate and Reformed Presbyteries and Synods. While there were significant differences among these bodies, and while liberalism or modernism was infecting some of them, they by and large agreed in their strong biblical and Reformed teachings.

However, under the surface there were changes going on in most of these churches. This certainly was the case in the PCUSA, by far the largest Presbyterian denomination in America. During the 1880s and 1890s there had been efforts to amend the Westminster Standards, as held by the PCUSA. Some said they were too dated, and needed to be made relevant for modern society; others wanted to soften their robust Calvinism. One of the leaders of this effort had been Charles Augustus Briggs of Union Theological Seminary in New York. However, the constitutional changes did not gain enough votes from the presbyteries, and in 1893 Briggs himself was suspended from the Presbyterian ministry on heresy charges. Union Seminary removed itself from Presbyterian supervision, but continued to produce graduates that were received into the church.

So, at least on the surface, the PCUSA appeared to be strongly conservative and

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Calvinistic as the new century began. But underneath, these doctrines were not held firmly by many in the church. Briggs himself had stated this back in 1889:

The Westminster System has been virtually displaced by the teaching of the dogmatic divines. It is no longer practically the standard of faith of the Presbyterian Church. The Catechisms are not taught in our churches, the Confession is not expounded in our theological seminaries. The Presbyterian Church is not orthodox by its own Standards. It has neither the old orthodoxy nor the new orthodoxy. It is in perplexity. It is drifting toward an unknown and a mysterious future.¹

The Cumberland Presbyterian Church and the Amendments of 1903

For several decades there had been efforts to court the Cumberland Presbyterian Church to reunite with the PCUSA. Nearly a hundred years earlier they had divided over the issue of Calvinism. The Cumberland churches favored an Arminian perspective, along with active and emotional evangelism. They desired to emphasize the love of God for all people, and were offended by those who limited that love to the elect. Many in the PCUSA shared that theological slant, and desired to accommodate the Cumberland emphasis. In addition, many others believed that strict Calvinism was unattractive to people in general, who preferred the idea that God loves all equally, and wishes the salvation of all.

The 1900 General Assembly received many overtures to revise the Confession of Faith or to make a newer, shorter confession. The Assembly started to work

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and appointed a committee to study the matter. After a year of inquiry and labor, another committee was appointed to draw up the proposed amendments, which were overwhelmingly adopted by the presbyteries in 1903. There were three categories of changes:

(1) The actual text of the Confession was amended in three places: the clause saying that “it is sinful to refuse lawful oaths” was removed; the statements identifying the pope as the antichrist were removed; and the statement that the good deeds of men are “sinful” was reworded to say they “fall short of what God requires.”²

(2) Two additional chapters were appended to the Confession: Ch. 34, “Of the Holy Spirit”; and Ch. 35, “Of the Love of God and Missions.”

(3) A “Declaratory Statement” was added to the Confession giving the church’s “authoritative” interpretation of the Confession at two points: (a) the eternal decree of God is consistent with his “love to all mankind” and his “desire” that all be saved; and (b) all infants dying in infancy are elect, regenerated, and saved.³

All these amendments, and the accompanying “declaratory statement,” had the total effect of softening the perceived harshness of some Calvinistic doctrines. When the changes were first proposed in 1900, B. B. Warfield of Princeton Seminary opposed any changes to the Confession.⁴ A typical conservative objection to the changes by Edward B. Hodge of Philadelphia was published in the *Princeton Theological Review* in 1903.⁵ That same year

Geerhardus Vos of Princeton published a lengthy article distinguishing the Pauline doctrine of forensic justification of the elect based on his fulfillment of the covenant of works from the more Arminian approach that saw the love of God as the basis of justification.⁶

But after their adoption was completed, Warfield put the best face on it, maintaining that the doctrines of the church were not materially affected by the amendments. He was seeking to show that the robust Calvinism of the original Confession remained still, and was opposing the Cumberland Presbyterian Church and those seeking union with it—people who used the revisions as evidence favoring a looser interpretation of the Confession.⁷

While conservative Presbyterians in the PCUSA opposed union with the Cumberland church and its Arminianism,⁸ the pressure built, and most of the Cumberland Presbyterian denomination was received into the PCUSA in 1906. Since that time the consistent Calvinism of the original PCUSA has been held by a continually shrinking portion of the church. Conservatives in the church found less unity around the whole Calvinistic and Reformed system of doctrine, and had to shrink their common area of defense to the “fundamentals” of the faith.

Modernism and fundamentalism

During the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century the “modernist” ideas were spreading throughout the universities, seminaries, and churches in Europe and America. These ideas sprang from the Enlightenment. Basically, truth was reduced to that which could be observed or

derived from human reason, and trust in any kind of divine revelation was rejected. People were very confident that this approach to knowledge would eliminate ignorance and bigotry and would bring a new golden age to this enlightened society.⁹

Warfield was seeking to show that the robust Calvinism of the original Confession remained still, and was opposing the Cumberland Presbyterian Church and those seeking union with it—people who used the revisions as evidence favoring a looser interpretation of the Confession.

As modernism impacted the churches, many Christian truths were changed or dropped altogether. Biblical “higher criticism” rejected the inspiration and even the authenticity of much of the Bible. Darwinian evolution provided a model for the development of plants, animals, and humanity without invoking miraculous creation. Marxist political and economic theory provided a new eschatological goal of a perfect socialist

society in this world. Modernist theology adapted classical Christian doctrines to the currently popular idea of “the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man.”

In 1908 the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America was formed, with significant participation by the PCUSA. Leadership in this council was decidedly pro-modernist in theology and liberal in politics and economics. Many conservatives were alarmed by the pronouncements and actions of the Federal Council.

Conservatives in all branches of the Christian church found their core beliefs under attack. Two Presbyterian laymen, Los Angeles businessmen Lyman and Milton Stewart, sponsored the publication in 1910 of *The Fundamentals*, several volumes of scholarly, timely articles by conservative Christian scholars; they had copies sent free to all the ministers in the country. This publication was a major reason for the conservatives being given the name “fundamentalists.”¹⁰

Within the PCUSA the modernist influence, openly taught at Union Theological Seminary in New York, and at least tolerated in the more moderate seminaries in the rest of the country, especially McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, continued growing. Princeton Seminary was the most important seminary in the denomination seeking to stem the tide.¹¹

In 1910 the General Assembly of the PCUSA, alarmed by modernist candidates to the ministry being licensed by some presbyteries, passed a resolution stating that certain “essential and necessary doctrines” must be believed by all officers of

the PCUSA. Five doctrines were chosen—doctrines under particular attack by modernists:

1. The inspiration and consequent infallibility of the Bible
2. The virgin birth of Christ
3. The substitutionary atonement of Christ
4. The physical resurrection of Christ
5. The miracles of Christ

These central Christian doctrines came to be known as the “five fundamentals.” Unfortunately for the conservatives, General Assembly resolutions were not binding on the presbyteries; more modernist ministers were ordained in spite of the resolution. The five fundamentals were re-asserted by the General Assemblies of 1916 and 1923 (with shrinking majority votes). Yet the tide toward modernism continued. In 1924 the last fundamentalist moderator was elected by the General Assembly, Clarence Macartney. That same assembly, however, failed to incorporate the five fundamentals into the requirements for ordination, and it rejected the effort to impose them on other church administrative or agency officials. At that point, the coalition of modernists and “inclusivists” (as J. Gresham Machen called them) controlled the majority. Fundamentalist Christianity never again prevailed in the PCUSA.

Modernism wins in the PCUSA

During the first third of the twentieth century the most prominent fundamentalist leader in the PCUSA was J. Gresham Machen, professor of New Testament at Princeton.¹² Recognized already in academic circles for his scholarly defense of the doctrines of the virgin birth of Christ and the origin of Paul’s theology in

Christ's teachings and atonement, his academic credentials made his more popular works carry much weight in the church at large. In 1923 Machen published the book that catapulted him into the midst of the controversy, *Christianity and Liberalism*. In this book he contrasted classic Christianity with the new doctrines in the basic areas of divinity (God, man, salvation, etc.). He demonstrated that they really are two different religions, not just two varieties of one religion.

In 1924, 1,274 Presbyterian ministers appended their names to the so-called Auburn Affirmation. This statement objected to making the five fundamentals required for ordination into the PCUSA ministry. In the view of the signers, the opinion of the General Assembly concerning these five "facts and doctrines" was only one "theory," and that other "theories" of these "facts and doctrines" were equally allowable in the PCUSA. Surprisingly, the 1924 General Assembly did nothing to address this affirmation. In 1927 the General Assembly officially determined that it could not determine "essential and necessary" doctrines to be believed to be ordained in the PCUSA, but could only rule on individual appeals. Thus the Auburn Affirmation position became the official policy of the church.

After the "inclusivists" had consolidated their position in the PCUSA, they tightened their control over the church at large by administrative means. By 1929 they amended the church constitution so that all local church properties became the property of the denomination. From that time on, the PCUSA could use financial pressure to enforce submission and conformity to its decisions. Ministers could lose their pensions; congregations could

lose their properties. Loetscher described the situation well:

The Presbyterian Church was forced, in order to preserve its unity, to decentralize control over the theological beliefs of its ministers and candidates for the ministry. The problem of power and freedom has thus been solved to date by simultaneously increasing administrative centralization and decreasing theological centralization; increasing physical power while at the same time anxiously seeking to prevent its trespassing on the realm of the spirit. This was also a concession to the pluralistic character of modern culture.... Increasingly prominent through at least the first third of the twentieth century was a pragmatic conception of the Church which, in the interests of avoiding divisions that would injure the Church's work, has substituted broad church inclusion of opposing theological views for theological answers to them.¹³

In that same year the General Assembly changed the board structure of Princeton Theological Seminary so that it would be controlled by the inclusivist party. Machen and a few others left Princeton and established Westminster Theological Seminary in the outskirts of Philadelphia.

From that point on, fundamentalists in the PCUSA fought a rear-guard defensive battle against modernism in the church. The modernists were making strides; for example, in 1930 the church voted to allow women elders.¹⁴ While fundamentalists were welcome to stay in the church, it was clear that they would have

to “behave,” and allow modernists and Auburn Affirmationists to minister alongside them.

Separation for the gospel

While modernism was being promoted actively at Union Theological Seminary in New York and by other bodies outside the control of the PCUSA, in general the pastors and seminaries within the PCUSA were basically orthodox in teaching, although many were tolerant of other views and favored an inclusive church. However, Machen and others soon discovered that there was more active modernist teaching going on directly by PCUSA ministers and teachers on the foreign mission field. This was apparent by the work and writings of missionary to China Pearl Buck, who believed all religions led to God. Machen was also informed about other missionaries under the Board of Foreign Missions who taught modernism, and even favored communism. By indirect pressure, Pearl Buck was forced to resign from the PCUSA work; but other modernists remained.

Machen became directly involved in this matter when he proposed to the Presbytery of New Brunswick in 1933 that an overture be sent to the General Assembly that the Board of Foreign Missions personnel, both on and off the field, assert their agreement to the fundamental doctrines of Christianity passed earlier by the assembly. At that time Machen published a 110-page booklet with documentation showing modernism in the PCUSA mission organization and teaching.¹⁵ The presbytery also invited Robert E. Speer, the senior secretary of the board. After a very brief debate, the presbytery rejected the overture and asserted its confidence in its board. However, other presbyteries

did send parallel overtures to the General Assembly, which considered them in its May 1933 meeting. The General Assembly took no action on those overtures, and once again approved of the work of its mission board—thereby approving the teaching of a false gospel.

Since support for the official mission board would mean supporting the teaching of the false modernist gospel in some places, Machen and other conservative churchmen could not in good conscience support it. In order to provide an alternative for people to support Bible-believing missionaries, he led in the formation of the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions (IBPFM) in June, 1933. This announcement was made by H. McAllister Griffiths immediately after the assembly’s refusal to remove heresy from the official board:

In view of the action of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. resisting the movement for reform of the Board of Foreign Missions, a new Board will be organized by Bible-believing Christians to promote truly Biblical and truly Presbyterian work.¹⁶

While the denominational leaders had tolerated Machen’s starting an independent seminary in 1929, they quickly acted to crush the new mission board. Obviously, the mission board would divert much more money away from the denomination than the seminary had. Immediately after the assembly of 1933 and the formation of the IBPFM, the General Council of the PCUSA developed a document called “Studies of the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.”¹⁷ It came to be called “the Man-

date of 1934.” It was approved and put into action by the denomination.

The Mandate reviewed the historical background of authority within the PCUSA, especially regarding mission work. It concluded that the General Assembly had ultimate control over the mission works of the church, and that all Presbyterians, especially officers, were obligated by their membership and vows to support the officially approved mission works, and no others:

Through years of experience, the General Assembly has finally decided that it can best administer the missionary work of the Presbyterian Church under its own ecclesiastical authority through Boards of its own appointment. The synods, presbyteries and churches of the denomination can sustain and countenance only such missionary agencies within their respective areas as the General Assembly authorizes and designates under the Constitution of the Church.¹⁸

This obligation was constitutionally no weaker than the obligation to partake of the Lord’s Supper.¹⁹ Every Presbyterian was obligated to use his offerings according to the rulings of the General Assembly “with the same fidelity and care as he is bound to believe in Christ and to keep His commandments.”²⁰ Of course, Machen and those with him rejected such a blasphemous and idolatrous interpretation of the church’s constitution, and the totalitarian church that would spring from it.

The Mandate of 1934 not only provided the theoretical basis for not allow-

ing the IBPFM to exist among members of the PCUSA, it also set forth a plan of action: the IBPFM must “desist forthwith”; all members must immediately sever their connections with the IBPFM; and all presbyteries must enforce these policies through church discipline.²¹ The report of the General Council was adopted by the General Assembly.

Machen and those with him rejected such a blasphemous and idolatrous interpretation of the church’s constitution, and the totalitarian church that would spring from it.

After the Mandate was adopted, some of the members of the IBPFM resigned; but Machen and others refused to comply with the order. Machen issued his statement, “I cannot obey the order,” based on three principles:

1. Obedience to the order in the way demanded by the General Assembly would involve support of a propaganda that is contrary to the gospel of Christ.
2. Obedience to the order in the way demanded by the General Assembly would involve substitution of a human authority for the authority of the Word of God.

3. Obedience to the order in the way demanded by the General Assembly would mean acquiescence in the principle that support of the benevolences of the Church is not a matter of free-will but the payment of a tax enforced by penalties.

He concluded that “all three of the above mentioned courses of conduct are forbidden by the Bible, and therefore I cannot engage in any of them.” At the same time, he insisted that he was “in accord with the Constitution of that Church and can appeal from the General Assembly to the Constitution.”²²

The stage was set for a division in the Presbyterian Church. Machen and others still prayed that the church could be reformed. But if not, in order to be true to the gospel, it was necessary for the Bible-believers to separate from the PCUSA. To fail to separate would mean that they would by necessity be supporting the false gospel of modernism.

THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH DIVIDES AND ADJUSTS (1934-1967)

The second major period of the century saw the PCUSA chart out a new theological stance. Having turned its back on the separated fundamentalists, it turned from conservative Calvinism to neo-orthodoxy and a whole new creed. Neo-orthodoxy had a similar impact on other Presbyterian denominations. While most conservative Presbyterians remained in the mainline churches, a few small conservative denominations continued their testimony.

Newly separated Presbyterians

The presbyteries, synods, and General Assembly of the PCUSA went into

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action, putting into effect the Mandate’s recommendations. Soon the members of the IBPFM who refused to resign were put on trial. Some were defrocked; some simply renounced the jurisdiction of the church and declared themselves independent. They concluded that the PCUSA was “officially and judicially apostate,” and no longer could Christians in good conscience remain in its fellowship. In all, about a hundred ministers joined the new denomination. Machen expected a major division to take place, and was profoundly disappointed by the small number of churches and ministers that actually withdrew from the PCUSA.

Nevertheless, believing that Presbyterian government was biblical, these men formed a new denomination in 1936, the Presbyterian Church of America.²³ Soon thereafter the PCUSA sued the new church in court, complaining that its name was too similar to that of the old church. Rather than appeal the case, the new church in 1939 changed its name to the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC), which name it still has today.

Machen died at the beginning of 1937, and by the end of that year the new church had divided. The minority that left it held their first Synod in 1938 as the Bible Presbyterian Church (BPC), and that body divided in 1956. The larger section of the BPC united with the Reformed Presbyterian Church (General Synod) in 1965, and that united body was received into the Presbyterian Church in America in 1982. The smaller section of the BPC has continued as the Bible Presbyterian Church, and remains as a separate denomination with the same name.²⁴

When the OPC began, it adopted the Westminster Confession, without the 1903 amendments, additions, and declaratory statement.²⁵ The BPC adopted the same standards that the OPC used, but it added a shortened form of the PCUSA declaratory statement (deleting the statement that all infants dying in infancy are saved, but allowing the possibility). The BPC also amended the Confession and Larger Catechism so that they taught the premillennial return of Christ. Both denominations claimed to be carrying on the true “spiritual succession” of the old PCUSA.

A tranquil path to neo-orthodoxy

The liberal and inclusivist (“broad church”) leaders in the PCUSA had worked hard to keep control of the church and its resources. They were surprised and pleased that so few left with Machen. In the decades that followed, church unity became the watchword, even as the church drifted further away from its biblical and Reformed theological tradition. Twenty years later Lefferts Loetscher summarized the situation:

The termination of the judicial cases in 1936 marked the virtual cessation to date of theological controversy within the Church’s judicatories. In spite of important internal diversities, the Church since 1936 has enjoyed the longest period of theological peace since the reunion of 1869.²⁶

During these years an important sea change took place in European theology that later impacted Presbyterians in America. As the twentieth century began, optimistic modernism or liberalism reigned supreme. Even many of the conservatives of the time were postmillennial in theol-

ogy, believing that the world was getting more Christian. Modernists were confident that greater scientific and technological progress, coupled with government-controlled economies, would bring in an era of “the kingdom of God.” The old Christian supernatural theology was now passé. This confident liberalism was the great enemy of the Princeton theologians of the time, and the modernist-fundamentalist conflict debated these issues.

However, the two world wars in the first half of the century brought a dose of reality to the liberals. Germany, regarded by many as the most advanced and scientific country in Europe, fell into militarism and then into unspeakable barbarity and cruelty. War brought out the beast in “Christian” people. Men were shown to be really evil. There was such a thing as sin. Christ’s “good example” was not enough. There had to be an atonement. The old liberalism was proven to be bankrupt.

There had to be a return to the realistic orthodoxy of ancient Christianity, of Calvin and the Reformation. Yet it was believed that critical biblical scholarship had shown that the Bible was not inerrant; the higher criticism of the Bible still stood. Therefore, theologians could not go back to the pre-critical fundamentalism of the past. What was needed was a new form of orthodoxy—Neo-orthodoxy, as it came to be called.

The main pioneer and leader of this new movement was Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968). Spending much of his early life in Germany, he ran afoul of the liberal theologians there who supported Germany’s militarism in the first

war. He believed that God supported no human system or philosophy. His groundbreaking commentary on Romans, first published in Germany in 1918,²⁷ started the theological revolution. His massive 12-volume *Church Dogmatics* is the main theological charter of neo-orthodoxy.²⁸ Basically, God is totally transcendent, not immanent as the liberals were claiming. We cannot comprehend God, nor speak his words. God cannot reveal himself through words, only by himself directly. All words (such as the Bible's) are merely human responses to this divine revelation, and as such are subject to the same errors as all humans share. The Bible is not the revelation of God, but only men's response to that revelation. However, it is the normative means through which God does reveal himself to us.

In Barth's view the only revelation of God that can properly be called the Word of God is the Lord Jesus Christ himself. Barth had a higher view of Christ than the liberal theologians, but he often used language in vague ways that made his views hard to pin down. As a result neo-orthodox theologians could assert their belief in the virgin birth of Christ, his miracles, his atonement, and his resurrection; but they could define them differently than traditional theology did—or refuse to define them altogether!

As neo-orthodoxy made its way into American universities and seminaries, and then into the churches, it provided a means whereby the PCUSA could put its old conflicts behind and start theologically afresh. Because of their vague definitions of key theological terms, ministers could preach neo-orthodox sermons, and the conservative parishioners, who were the main financial supporters of the

church, would be convinced of the orthodoxy of the pastor. In this way people who did not believe the traditional meaning of the creeds of the church could still assert their belief in them and be ordained into the Presbyterian Church.

Neo-orthodox theologians could assert their belief in the virgin birth of Christ, his miracles, his atonement, and his resurrection; but they could define them differently than traditional theology did—or refuse to define them altogether!

A major landmark of this change was the new Faith and Life Curriculum, edited by James D. Smart. In 1948 the PCUSA adopted this curriculum to be taught in its Sunday schools.²⁹ The new curriculum thoroughly integrated neo-orthodox theology and biblical interpretation into the traditional material. For example, in telling the account of Moses and the burning bush the illustration was changed from the traditional scene showing Moses standing before the bush. It was felt that picturing the bush would be a crassly "literal" understanding that would overshadow the spiritual significance of the

story. On the other hand, showing the bush as an idea of Moses (as in a balloon above his head) would indicate that the event was only in his mind. The problem was solved by showing a picture of the face of Moses looking startled and lightened up, and leaving out the bush entirely.³⁰ Since the adoption of this curriculum, succeeding generations of Presbyterians in the PCUSA have been brought up in the neo-orthodox tradition.

On to a new confession

With the ending of World War II America entered an era of growth and prosperity unequalled in her history. Americans had great pride in their country, and the Presbyterian churches joined in the good feelings of belonging to the “greatest country in the world.” In order to shed its reputation as a leftist organization, in 1950 the Federal Council of Churches joined with several other bodies and was reorganized into the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA. The PCUSA remained active in the new council. Yet, at the same time, the powerful Communistic Soviet Union was a threat, along with Communist China. Most Presbyterians opposed Communism; however, there was a pro-leftist group that was influential in the educational institutions and in ecumenical organizations. The fundamentalist American Council of Christian Churches had been formed in 1941, and the National Association of Evangelicals followed in 1942. While these two conservative agencies disagreed about separation from the mainline churches, they both presented an anti-Communist position and opposed the liberal policies of the newly reorganized National Council of Churches. This conflict was also carried out internationally, with the formation of two church councils at the same time

(1948) and in the same place (Amsterdam): the liberal, mainline World Council of Churches, and the fundamentalist, separated International Council of Christian Churches. The mainline Presbyterian churches belonged to the WCC, while the BPC belonged to and helped start the ICC.

In 1958 the PCUSA united with the smaller United Presbyterian Church of North America, itself a union of two Associate Reformed bodies. This church was of Scottish Presbyterian background, but had followed the same liberalizing tendencies as the larger denomination. The name of the new church was changed to the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (UPCUSA).

After the disappointment of the Korean War and the violent reaction against the anti-Communist crusade of Senator Joseph McCarthy, many Americans entered the 1960s much more sympathetic to leftist thinking. Of course, the 1960s themselves were the years of cultural revolution in America, as many moral norms were forsaken and all authority rejected by millions in the “hippie generation.” In addition, the anti-war movement heated up as America became more involved in the Vietnam War.

Inheriting the anti-militaristic stance of Barth and the early neo-orthodox theologians, Presbyterian leaders naturally supported the liberal causes of the day, in particular the peace movement. The time had come for the UPCUSA to officially cast off its pre-critical, hierarchical, traditional creed, and set forth its faith in a new creed, adapted to the times. A committee was appointed to draw up a new confession, headed by Princeton profes-

sor Edward A. Dowey. The new confession was entitled the Confession of 1967, and was adopted in that year. The new confession centers around the concept of “reconciliation,” and leaves out many major orthodox doctrines of the church. The “reconciliation” spoken of is focused on various social issues of the time: peace, civil rights, feminism, poverty, and the ecumenical movement.

**Carl McIntire’s
nationwide daily
radio broadcasts
constantly exposed
these activities.**

When adopting this confession the UPCUSA altered its entire creedal base. It completely eliminated the Westminster Larger Catechism from its creeds. The Westminster Confession of Faith and Shorter Catechism were relegated, along with the new Confession of 1967, to a *Book of Confessions*, which included several other ecumenical and Reformed creeds. At the same time, the church’s ordination vows were changed, so that they required, not that the person “believe” the doctrines contained in the *Book of Confessions*, but only that he or she would “be guided” by them. Before, the UPCUSA had forsaken its creeds in practice; now it was official.

Many Presbyterians in the UPCUSA opposed these changes, but they were voted down by large majorities; very few of them left the denomination. Other Presbyterian groups spoke out against the

changes. The Bible Presbyterian Church held a special Synod meeting at the same time the Confession of 1967 was adopted, and distributed thousands of copies of a book providing a thorough criticism of the new confession and vows.³¹

THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH REALIGNS ITSELF (1967-2006)

The final forty years of this century of Presbyterian history takes us from a church that confidently announces itself as a church for the times, to a church that is declining and fragmented, with little sense of unity. Alongside are smaller, more conservative Presbyterian churches that are staking out their claims in American Presbyterianism.

New divisions and consolidation

The decades of the 1960s and 1970s witnessed a sharp turn to the left by the mainline Presbyterian churches in America. Many ministerial candidates had been radicalized in their university and seminary training by the civil unrest of the Vietnam War era. While the laypeople tended to remain moderately conservative, the church leadership pushed a leftist agenda. One example is the support given by the World Council of Churches for pro-communistic revolutionary movements in Africa through its Program to Combat Racism.³² In a similar fashion, the UPCUSA in 1971 gave \$25,000 to the Black Panthers and \$10,000 to the Angela Davis Defense Fund,³³ using money Presbyterians had donated for missions. Occasionally there was widespread opposition to these actions by church leaders. BPC minister Carl McIntire’s nationwide daily radio broadcasts³⁴ constantly exposed these activities, and the secular press occasionally reported them as well.³⁵

Many Presbyterians in the mainline denominations began to leave their denominations, and as the older generation died out, the churches were having difficulty holding the younger generation. This resulted in major declines in membership. In the ten years after the adoption of the Confession of 1967 the UPCUSA lost 684,000 members, over 20% of its total membership, with the largest numbers leaving in 1972-1973.³⁶ Where did these hundreds of thousands of former UPCUSA members go? It is evident that only a very small percentage joined the smaller separated Presbyterian bodies. It appears that many of them either affiliated with no church at all, or joined other, non-Presbyterian churches.³⁷

In 1960 Eugene Carson Blake, stated clerk of the UPCUSA, proposed a grandiose plan to merge several mainline Protestant denominations in America, including the mainline Episcopal and Methodist churches. Two years later, the Consultation on Church Union was formed (COCU). For forty years this agency tried to unite several denominations, but failed because of practical difficulties. Recently, in 2002, the organization was reorganized and renamed the Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC). The PCUSA is a leading part of this group, which now includes several other denominations.³⁸ This plan to merge with other churches shows the desire of the PCUSA to become larger through acquisition, even though Presbyterian doctrines would necessarily be left behind. Of course, by this time these mainline denominations have left behind not only their denominational distinctives, but even the common basic Christian doctrines that once provided the spiritual union of Protestant churches.

During this period the UPCUSA and the PCUS each has suffered a formal division, when conservatives pulled out of the denominations to start other church bodies. In 1973 dissatisfied Presbyterians separated from the Southern church, the PCUS, and formed the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA).³⁹ Later, in 1982, the PCA absorbed into its membership from the Northern church tradition the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod. While still predominately a Southern denomination, the PCA continues to expand in other areas of the country as well. Likewise, the Northern church suffered a departure in 1981, when conservatives withdrew to establish the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC). While it is conservative in theology, the EPC differs from the other separated Presbyterian bodies in allowing the ordination of women ministers. Both the PCA and the EPC, while being separatist bodies, have a closer connection to the broadly evangelical position than the earlier breakaway churches (like the OPC and the BPC), being members of the National Association of Evangelicals.

Both the UPCUSA and the PCUS continued the same liberal policies as before, especially after the departure of some of the more vocal conservatives. Finally, after 122 years of separation, the two churches united in 1983. The new united church is called the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Since that time no significant divisions or unions have taken place among the major Presbyterian bodies in America.

Continuing decline and fragmentation in the PCUSA

Since the 1960s the Northern church membership has shrunk significantly.

Even its union with the PCUS in 1983 did not stop the downhill slide—membership in the UPCUSA in 1980 was 3,262,086, and membership in the combined PCUSA in 1985 was 3,048,235, a decline of over 200,000 in only five years, even including the infusion from the PCUS. This membership decline has continued steadily since then. In 2003 it numbered 2,405,311—nearly a million lost in just over twenty years. Today it is about half in size what it was in 1960.⁴⁰

Not only is the PCUSA in numerical decline, as are the other liberal mainline churches, but it is fragmenting also. Neo-orthodoxy has faded as a unifying theology, and several competing ideologies are now warring against each other. This decline of a unifying theology is a natural result of the existential philosophy undergirding much of neo-orthodoxy. Existentialism taught that we all are isolated by our own wills; our wills define us. This idea moved naturally into the prevailing postmodernist philosophy that there is no overarching truth applicable to all. Truth is relative. With this philosophy the church can contain mutually exclusive teachings in perfect harmony. Therefore, different, competing communities have formed in the church. There are the traditional moralists, and there are the gays and lesbians. There are the industrialists and the environmentalists. There are the evangelicals and the universalists. All are welcome and “celebrated.” The church supports many “caucuses” for women, blacks, youth, Middle Easterners, Hispanics/Latinos, Native Americans, and several other special interest groups. Whatever theological center of agreement there has been in the PCUSA is shrinking to the point of non-existence.

The PCUSA is trying to be the “big tent” that includes all sides of all issues (with the exception of the “politically correct” issues, where uniformity is enforced). Recently, however, the conflict over sexual morality has taken on serious tones for the church leaders. Recent General Assemblies have reaffirmed that sexual relations outside of marriage are out of accord with the Bible and church teaching. But homosexual interest groups have been fervently lobbying, supported by many Presbyterian leaders. In its last General Assembly (June 2006) the PCUSA seemed to reassert its position by approving a report by the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity that keeps the current ordination standards in the denomination’s constitution, but at the same time they allowed those who choose not to obey them to declare them to be non-essential. In other words, this requirement for chastity is “necessary,” unless the candidate and the church or presbytery decide that it is “not necessary.” This is the same strategy to circumvent the church’s standards that the modernists employed during the controversy surrounding the “five fundamentals” nearly a hundred years ago.

Reaction to the ruling has been swift. Several presbyteries and church organizations are threatening to withdraw from the church.⁴¹ It remains to be seen if that will happen. It seems strange that these conservatives failed to withdraw when the church allowed the ordination of candidates who denied fundamental Christian doctrines, but now threaten to withdraw when candidates are ordained who live an immoral lifestyle. Of course, either case shows the apostasy of the church.

The smaller Presbyterian denominations

A handful of smaller Presbyterian denominations continue to exist and grow in America. Edwin P. Elliott, editor of the *Christian Observer* magazine, has categorized the smaller of these denominations as Presbyterian “mini-churches” and Presbyterian “micro-churches.” These denominations include, in addition to the PCA, the OPC, the EPC, and the BPC, various continuing churches from the Cumberland Presbyterian Church and from the Associate and Reformed Presbyterian churches, especially the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (ARPC) and the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA). In addition, scores of smaller Presbyterian denominations and individual unaffiliated Presbyterian congregations exist.

Most of these smaller Presbyterian denominations are conservative, and many of them are growing. However, at present they comprise only about 20% of the total number of Presbyterians in America. In addition, there are some theological conflicts within these churches, such as the new Auburn Avenue theology, that may dilute their message as well as weaken these churches by internal dissonance.⁴²

Theological education has followed a similar pattern. While the number of pastoral candidates in mainline Presbyterian seminaries is in decline, more conservative schools show an increase, such as Westminster Theological Seminary, Westminster Seminary California, Reformed Theological Seminary, Covenant Theological Seminary, and Knox Theological Seminary. In addition several smaller conservative and confessional seminaries have begun and are growing.⁴³

The challenge of the future

Presbyterianism has never been the largest denomination in America, but in the Colonial days it represented a significant minority; the largest churches were the Congregationalists in New England, the Presbyterians in the Middle Colonies, and the Church of England (Episcopalians) in the South. Later, during the Westward Movement, the Methodists and Baptists overtook the other churches; but still the Presbyterians were a significant force. However, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, 300 years after the first presbytery was formed, Presbyterians account for only about 1% of the population of America.

The mainline PCUSA, by far the largest Presbyterian denomination, has forsaken its roots and promotes a false gospel. There are still many Bible believers in that denomination, but the Scriptures instruct them to separate from that church.⁴⁴ The smaller, more conservative Presbyterian churches, perhaps accounting for a mere 0.2% of the American population, now represent the more traditional and biblical Presbyterian church. Obviously, America provides a vast mission field for us! We believe that Presbyterian doctrine and government are biblical, and should therefore be attractive to Christians who study the Bible. May the Lord enable us to be faithful to these truths, and evangelistically enthusiastic in taking them to America. 📖

¹ Charles Augustus Briggs, *Whither? A Theological Question for the Times* (New York: Scribners, 1889), 223.

² WCF 22:3; 25:6; and 16:7, respectively.

³ Dealing with WCF 3 and 10:3, respectively.

⁴ B. B. Warfield, *Revision or Reaffirma-*

tion (Princeton, 1900), pp. 1-4 (quoted in Lefferts A. Loetscher, *The Broadening Church: A Study of Theological Issues in the Presbyterian Church Since 1869* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1957], 83).

⁵ “The Proposed Amendments and Additions to the Text of the Confession,” *PTR* 1:3 (July 1903), 282-284.

⁶ “The Alleged Legalism in Paul’s Doctrine of Justification,” *PTR* 1:2 (April 1903), 161-179.

⁷ B. B. Warfield, *The Confession of Faith as Revised in 1903* (Richmond, 1904; reprinted as Chapter 24 in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, ed. by John E. Meeter [Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1973], 2:370-410).

⁸ E.g., see two articles in the 1904 *PTR*: Edward B. Hodge, “The Story of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church,” *PTR* 2:2 (April 1904), 283-294; Benjamin B. Warfield, “The Proposed Union with the Cumberland Presbyterians,” *PTR* (April 1904), 295-316.

⁹ The development of modernism and the subsequent modernist-fundamentalist conflict are very well documented by a vast literature. Some of this documentation is noted in earlier issues of the *WRS Journal* (*A Frank Critique of the Modern Ecumenical Movement*, 4:1 [February 1997]; *Social Action vs. Social Gospel*, 6:1 [February 1999]).

¹⁰ *The Fundamentals* are still in print (4 vols.; reprinted; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996).

¹¹ Cf. Loetscher, *The Broadening Church*, 74-82.

¹² 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

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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).

¹³ *The Broadening Church*, 93.

¹⁴ The first woman minister in the PCUSA was ordained in 1956, and the first woman minister in the PCUS was ordained in 1965.

¹⁵ J. Gresham Machen, *Modernism and the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.* (self published, 1933).

¹⁶ *Christianity Today* 4 (June 1933), 13 (quoted in Rian, *The Presbyterian Conflict*, 100).

¹⁷ Published in the *Minutes* of the 146th G. A. of the PCUSA (1934), 69-116.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 110.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 113.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 115-116.

²² J. Gresham Machen, *Statement to the Special Committee of the Presbytery of New Brunswick . . .* (self published, 1934), 14-15. This 98-page booklet summarizes Machen's position regarding the Mandate, including correspondence related to his case.

²³ These events are mentioned only briefly in this article. For details and documentation of the newly separated church and its division in 1937, see articles in *The Bible Presbyterian Church: Foundations and Opportunities: Part 1*, *WRS Journal* 11:1 (February 2004), and *Part 2*, *WRS Journal* 11:2 (August 2004).

²⁴ For some details about this history of the BPC, see John A. Battle, "Eschatology in the Bible Presbyterian Church," *WRS Journal* 11:2 (August 2004), 12-27.

²⁵ There was one exception: the new church did not restore the statement that the pope was the Antichrist.

²⁶ *The Broadening Church*, 155.

²⁷ *Der Romerbrief*. Barth issued six editions of this commentary by 1928. The sixth edition has been translated into English by Edwyn C. Hoskyns, *The Epistle to the Romans* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933; often reprinted).

²⁸ Barth published the work over a long period, 1932-1968. English translation by G. W. Bromily and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936-1969).

²⁹ In 1963 the Southern church, the PCUS, adopted a similar curriculum, the Covenant Life Curriculum, for its churches.

³⁰ This and other interesting details are given by William B. Kennedy, "Neo-orthodoxy Goes to Sunday School: The Christian Faith and Life Curriculum," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 58:4 (Winter, 1980), 326-39.

³¹ Carl McIntire, *The Death of a Church* (Collingswood, N.J.: Christian Beacon Press, 1967). This book contains the new confession and vows, the parallel sections of the Westminster Confession, a good discussion of the differences, and the history surrounding these events. After the assembly, Dr. McIntire sponsored a nationwide trip by three Bible Presbyterians in a hearse to distribute the book. I remember as a student at Highland College in Pasadena, California, helping to wash and wax the hearse for an in-studio appearance on a popular television talk show that night. Studio workers had to spray the hearse with a dull goo because it was too shiny for the cameras!

³² Some of these groups employed terrorism, and the murder of innocent Christians, even missionaries; e.g., see

“WCC Grant in 1978 Caused Dismay Even Among Liberals,” *The Presbyterian Layman* (October-November, 1978), on the internet: <http://www.layman.org/layman/news/news-around-church/wcc-1978reprint.htm>.

³³ Angela Davis was an African-American Communist professor at the University of California and active in the Black Panther Party.

³⁴ His *Twentieth Century Reformation Hour* at its peak was broadcast daily over 600 radio stations in America. He was a pioneer in the modern talk radio phenomenon. But, unlike modern talk show hosts, he was not commercially sponsored; instead, he raised offerings to buy time on these stations. His Christian Beacon Press also produced a weekly newspaper, the *Christian Beacon*, and many scrapbooks, booklets, and pamphlets exposing the activities of the liberal leaders in the UPCUSA and in the National and World Councils of Churches. These were distributed through his broadcast by the thousands to laypeople across the country.

³⁵ As in the *Readers Digest* (October 1971); and “Going Beyond Charity: Should Christian Cash Be Given to Terrorists?” *Time Magazine* (October 2, 1978).

³⁶ Yearly losses are listed in John Battle, *Ten Years of the Confession of 1967* (Collingswood, N.J.: Christian Beacon Press, 1977), 3.

³⁷ Carl McIntire sometimes complained, “I’ve shaken the apples off the tree, but someone else is picking them up!”

³⁸ African Methodist Episcopal Church, African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, Christian Church-Disciples of Christ, Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, Episcopal Church, International

Council of Community Churches, United Church of Christ, and United Methodist Church.

³⁹ The formation and early history of the PCA is described in detail by Frank Joseph Smith, *The History of the Presbyterian Church in America: The Continuing Church Movement* (Manassas, Virginia: Reformation Educational Foundation, 1985).

⁴⁰ For an illuminating chart showing the decline in membership in the mainline churches, and contrasting it with the growth in some conservative churches, see this website of the Institute on Religion and Democracy: <http://www.ird-renew.org/>.

⁴¹ E.g., the Mississippi Presbytery and the churches associated with New Wineskins (*The Layman Online* [July 14 and July 20, 2006]).

⁴² See the accompanying article by Dennis W. Jowers in this issue of the *WRS Journal*, “The Present State of American Presbyterianism.”

⁴³ Such as the members of the new accrediting agency, the Association of Reformed Theological Seminaries (ARTS), founded in 1999: American University of Biblical Studies, Birmingham Theological Seminary, FAREL Reformed Theological Seminary, Geneva Reformed Seminary, Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, New Geneva Theological Seminary, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, Sangre de Cristo Seminary, and Western Reformed Seminary.

⁴⁴ See Gary G. Cohen, “The Bible Presbyterian Position on Ecclesiastical Separation,” *WRS Journal* 11:2 (August 2004) 5-12.

APPLICATION & PERSPECTIVE

THE PRESENT STATE OF AMERICAN PRESBYTERIANISM

Dennis W. Jowers

The successes of the preceding three hundred years of Presbyterianism in America notwithstanding, the outlook for conservative, Bible-believing Presbyterianism today is quite bleak. In the following, we shall attempt to substantiate three fundamental claims. First, the growth of conservative, American, Presbyterian denominations in recent decades has failed to keep pace with the United States' population growth. Second, such denominations, whether considered individually or as a whole, are mere pygmies when compared to the U.S. population or even the liberal-controlled Presbyterian Church, USA (PCUSA). Third, and perhaps most tragically, conservative Presbyterian churches are deeply divided by the so-called Auburn Avenue theology. This new theology must, on the one hand, be squelched if these churches are to maintain their historic witness; and, on the other hand, it threatens, along with other intra-Presbyterian disputes, to engulf the churches in preoccupation with internal conflicts, thus stifling renewal in the areas of evangelism and mission.

I. NUMERICAL DECLINE RELATIVE TO POPULATION GROWTH

The membership statistics for American denominations maintained by the Association of Religious Data Archives¹ indicate that the United States' population growth has vastly outstripped the growth of the most conservative American Presbyterian denominations. The Reformed Church in the United States, for example, between 1971 and 1998 added only 219 members to its rolls. During the same period of time, the United States added 80 million persons to its population. The Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), the largest and fastest growing relatively conservative Presbyterian denomination, added 82,221 persons to its rolls between 1990 and 2000; the population of the United States during the same period increased by approximately 40 million persons. One may protest that such absolute comparisons unduly exaggerate the extent of evangelistic failure on the part of conservative Presbyterian churches. They are intended, however, only to highlight the datum that conservative Presbyterian churches are failing to grow at sufficient rates even to sustain the comparatively miniscule influence for good they presently exert.

II. NUMERICAL INSIGNIFICANCE RELATIVE TO OVERALL POPULATION

Again, the PCA, by far the largest and most thriving somewhat conservative Presbyterian church in the United States possesses, according to its denominational website,² approximately 306,000

“communicant and non-communicant members.” The current U.S. population is between 299 and 300 million persons. If one pooled all of the conservative Presbyterian churches, such as the members of the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council, those denominations to the right of it such as the Bible Presbyterian Church and the Heritage Netherlands Reformed Churches, and evangelical congregations that remain within the Christian Reformed Church in North America and the PCUSA, it seems one could hardly form a group of more than 600,000 or 700,000 persons, approximately one fifth of the size of the 3.5 million member PCUSA. At the most, therefore, Reformed believers and their children constitute 0.23% of the United States’ population.

Many of the most doctrinally sound Reformed congregations, moreover, are composed mainly of persons fifty years of age or older and are, therefore, barring some radical rejuvenation, slated to close in two or at most three decades. Something of a crisis mentality is, therefore, quite appropriate for Reformed believers in the present. If the Reformed faith is to play any appreciable role in America’s future religious history, the Presbyterian

clergy and laity must be awakened from their complacency and emboldened to adopt a much more aggressive posture in the areas of evangelism, church-planting, and missions.

III. INTERNAL CONFLICTS: THE AUBURN AVENUE THEOLOGY

In the process of renovating themselves, however, the Reformed churches must also adhere to biblical standards of doctrine and life. When forced to choose between numerical growth and faithfulness to God, the church must, of course, opt for faithfulness to God; it would be perverse to sacrifice God’s honor in order to aggrandize a human institution. In order to be faithful to God, moreover, the Reformed churches must firmly repudiate all teachings that detract from the purity of the gospel.

What is commonly known as the Federal Vision, or Auburn Avenue theology, it seems, constitutes just such a teaching and has wended its way into influential circles within the Reformed churches. Its adherents advocate at least three tenets that place them squarely at odds with the Reformed faith as delineated in Scripture and the Reformed confessions. Specifically, proponents of the Auburn Avenue theology, first, deny the existence of a covenant of works distinct from the covenant of grace.³ Scripture clearly states, however, that even after the fall, God offers salvation to human beings on the condition of perfect obedience to the moral law (Lev 18:5; Ezek 20:11b; Matt 19:17b; Gal 3:12): a condition no one descended from Adam by way of ordinary generation can fulfill.

Scripture states as well that God, in view of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on

At the most, therefore, Reformed believers and their children constitute 0.23% of the United States’ population.

the cross, offers human beings salvation on the sole condition of justifying faith. If one distinguishes between two covenants, a covenant of works and a covenant of grace, one can just as easily distinguish two radically contrasting conditions of salvation: perfect obedience to the moral law and mere justifying faith, which is incompatible with reliance upon one's own works for salvation. If God offers only one covenant with salvation as its reward, however, then both obedience and faith must constitute conditions of that covenant. By forsaking the distinction between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace, therefore, advocates of the Auburn Avenue theology seem at least implicitly to abandon the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

Proponents of the Auburn Avenue theology, second, deny the legitimacy of a distinction between the visible and the invisible church.⁴ Traditional Reformed theologians distinguish between the regenerate, who compose the invisible church, the mystical body of Christ, whom God unconditionally elects to salvation; and the merely visible church, which includes the tares who possess no genuine faith and no share in the covenant of grace. Auburn Avenue enthusiasts, by contrast, maintain that regenerate and unregenerate baptized persons alike are members of Christ's body.⁵ They distinguish only between the historic (= "militant" in traditional terminology) church and the eschatological (= "triumphant" in traditional terminology) church: between, that is to say, those who keep their baptismal covenant and those who do not.⁶

To replace the former distinction with the latter, however, is to imply: (1) that members of Christ's mystical body can

revoke their membership in that body;⁷ (2) that elect and reprobate members of the visible church are partakers of the same covenant with God; (3) that those who persevere in faith possess no covenant privileges that those who apostatize do not;⁸ and (4) that persons are saved, therefore, not because God enters into some special covenant with them, but because of their obedience to the conditions of a covenant made with elect and reprobate members of the visible church. The first implication is manifestly inconsistent with a traditional Reformed understanding of the perseverance of the saints. The second, third, and fourth implications, moreover, amount to a statement that human beings, as opposed to God's covenant of grace *per se*, determine who is and who is not saved. This statement, it seems, comes perilously close to a denial of two critically important Reformed doctrines that advocates of the Auburn Avenue theology themselves endorse: namely, that God predestines human beings to salvation or damnation and that

The Auburn Avenue theology constitutes a sacramentalistic legalism that is in important respects inconsistent with the gospel of justification by grace alone through faith alone.

sinner's are saved by God's grace alone.

Proponents of the Auburn Avenue theology, third, implicitly deny the possibility of an infallible assurance of salvation.⁹ Scripture and the Reformed confessions direct Christians to gain assurance partially by examining their lives and determining thereby that the Holy Spirit has actually transformed them in accordance with God's promises to genuine believers. Advocates of the Auburn Avenue system, however, direct Christians to seek assurance in their baptism. That is to say, supporters of the new teaching direct persons to assure themselves of their membership in the visible church by reference to an external token of this membership: baptism.¹⁰ As the Auburn Avenue theorists themselves would grant, however, membership in the visible church is no infallible guarantee of salvation. Although this teaching's proponents speak much of assurance, therefore, their theology allows for no infallible assurance of salvation at all.

The three tenets that we have discussed (a. the denial of the existence of a covenant of works as distinct from the covenant of grace; b. the denial of the existence of a real distinction between the visible and invisible church; c. the denial of the possibility of genuine assurance of salvation) by no means exhaust the range of errors spawned by the Auburn Avenue theology. Discussion of these three suffices, however, to uncover this teaching's thoroughgoing incompatibility with what has traditionally been regarded as the Reformed faith. The Auburn Avenue theology constitutes a sacramentalistic legalism that is in important respects inconsistent with the gospel of justification by grace alone through faith alone. Extirpat- ing the Auburn Avenue theology, natu-

rally, will neither preserve nor expand foundering Reformed churches; if these churches come to advocate the Auburn Avenue theology, however, they will be worth neither preserving nor expanding.

IV. CONCLUSION

The conservative Presbyterian churches in America, accordingly, face an extraordinary challenge. They must eradicate the Auburn Avenue theology simply in order to remain evangelical Christian churches; and yet they must not allow themselves to become so engrossed in this and other intra-Presbyterian controversies that they fail to communicate the Reformed faith to the 99.77 % of Americans who are not conservative Reformed Christians. All Reformed denominations must become aggressive, enterprising, and enthusiastic in their evangelism and outreach if they are to gain an appreciable number of adherents. Countless congregations, in fact, need radically to reform themselves simply in order to survive.

Reformed churches need desperately, for example, to relieve pastors of administrative duties in order to free them for sermon preparation and personal evangelism. Programs of proven effectiveness such as Evangelism Explosion clinics and Rutherford House's Reformed alternative to the Alpha Course ought to be exploited more than they are at present. Aggressive programs of visitation ought to be implemented. Expedients as simple as encouraging individuals to target selected friends, relatives, and neighbors to evangelize need to be used on a much wider scale than they are at present. The present state of American Presbyterianism is, after all, abysmal. Without in any way altering or diluting the Reformed faith, the Reformed churches must radically in-

crease their evangelistic efforts if they are to emerge from their present, bleak situation. 📖

¹ See website thearda.com.

² See website pcanet.org.

³ Cf. e.g. Rich Lusk's essay, "A Response to 'The Biblical Plan of Salvation,'" in *The Auburn Avenue Theology: Pros & Cons: Debating the Federal Vision* (ed. E. Calvin Beisner; Fort Lauderdale, Fla.: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004), 118–48, which is a polemic against the notion of a covenant of works distinct from the covenant of grace.

⁴ "A problem is created," writes Doug Wilson, "when we affirm a belief in two Churches at the same moment in time, one visible and the other invisible. . . . This leads to a disparagement of the visible Church, and eventually necessitates, I believe, a baptistic understanding of the Church," *Reformed is not Enough: Recovering the Objectivity of the Covenant* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2002), 74.

⁵ In the words of Steve Wilkins, "The Bible teaches us that baptism unites us to Christ and His body by the power of the Holy Spirit. . . . At baptism, we are clothed with Christ, united to Him and to His Church, which is His body," *The Federal Vision* (Monroe, La.: Athanasius Press, 2004), 55.

⁶ Cf. Wilson, *Reformed is Not Enough*, 74.

⁷ "Men fall away," writes Wilson, "because their salvation was contingent upon continued faithfulness in the gospel" (ibid. 138).

⁸ "All in covenant," writes Wilkins, "are given all that is true of Christ" ("Covenant, Baptism, and Salvation," *Auburn Avenue Theology*, 254–69 at 263. Every

person in covenant, affirms Wilkins, possesses "all things that pertain to life and godliness" (ibid. 267).

⁹ John Barach explain the Auburn Avenue theorists' conception of assurance thus:

If one can belong to God for a time . . . and yet later fall away and perish, then how can one know that he will belong to God, not just temporarily but forever? To answer that question, it may be helpful to think about a family which has just adopted . . . a child. How can that child be sure that he will always be a member of the family? How does he know he will not one day be disinherited? He can have that assurance because he is a member of the family now, because his parents feed him and hug him and tell him they love him, because he trusts his parents not to disinherit him without cause, and because he responds to them as a faithful child, making his adoption sure. And so it is with us. Covenant-breakers will be cut off and they ought to tremble. But no one who trusts in God will be put to shame ("Covenant and Election," *Auburn Avenue Theology*, 149–56 at 156).

We leave it to the reader to determine whether the assurance spoken of by Barach corresponds to the "infallible assurance of faith" spoken of by the Westminster divines.

¹⁰ "A faithful Christian," writes Wilson, "looks to his baptism for assurance" (*Reformed is Not Enough*, 130).