

## **PRESBYTERIANISM IN AMERICA The 20<sup>th</sup> 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 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.<sup>1</sup>

### ***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 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.”<sup>2</sup>
- (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: (1) the eternal decree of

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

<sup>2</sup> WCF 22:3; 25:6; and 16:7, respectively.

God is consistent with his “love to all mankind” and his “desire” that all be saved; and (2) all infants dying in infancy are elect, regenerated, and saved.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup> A typical conservative objection to the changes by Edward B. Hodge of Philadelphia was published in the *Princeton Theological Review* in 1903.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup>

While conservative Presbyterians in the PCUSA opposed union with the Cumberland church and its Arminianism,<sup>8</sup> 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

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<sup>3</sup> Dealing with WCF 3 and 10:3, respectively.

<sup>4</sup> B. B. Warfield, *Revision or Reaffirmation* (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).

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

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

<sup>7</sup> 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).

<sup>8</sup> 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.

knowledge would eliminate ignorance and bigotry and would bring a new golden age to this enlightened society.<sup>9</sup>

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.”<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup>

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

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<sup>9</sup> 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]).

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

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Loetscher, *The Broadening Church*, 74-82.

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.<sup>12</sup> 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

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<sup>12</sup> The historical information in this and the following sections has been well documented and can be found in various sources. To save space, I do not footnote each detail; questions about specific documentation may be sent to the author. Here are some secondary sources with documentation: Edwin H. Rian, *The Presbyterian Conflict* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1940; reprinted, Philadelphia: The Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1992); Ned B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1954); Lefferts A. Loetscher, *The Broadening Church: A Study of Theological Issues in the Presbyterian Church Since 1869* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1957); *A Brief History of the Bible Presbyterian Church and Its Agencies*, compiled by Margaret G. Harden (n.p. [Collingswood, New Jersey: Christian Beacon Press], n.d. [ca. 1966]); George P. Hutchinson, *The History Behind the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod* (Cherry Hill, New Jersey: Mack Publishing Company, 1974); *Pressing Toward the Mark: Essays Commemorating Fifty Years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, ed. by Charles G. Dennison and Richard C. Gamble (Philadelphia: The Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1986); Robert K. Churchill, *Lest We Forget: A Personal Reflection on the Formation of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (2<sup>nd</sup> 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).

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.<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup> 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

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<sup>13</sup> *The Broadening Church*, 93.

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

avored 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

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."<sup>17</sup> It came to be called "the Mandate 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:

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

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

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

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.<sup>18</sup>

This obligation was constitutionally no weaker than the obligation to partake of the Lord's Supper.<sup>19</sup> 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."<sup>20</sup> 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 allowing 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.<sup>21</sup> The report of the General Council was adopted by the General Assembly.

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."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 115-116.

<sup>22</sup> 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.



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 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.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> 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).

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

When the OPC began, it adopted the Westminster Confession, without the 1903 amendments, additions, and declaratory statement.<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup>

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 theology, 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.

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

<sup>26</sup> *The Broadening Church*, 155.

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,<sup>27</sup> started the theological revolution. His massive 12-volume *Church Dogmatics* is the main theological charter of neo-orthodoxy.<sup>28</sup> 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.

A major landmark of this change was the new Faith and Life Curriculum, edited by James D. Smart. This curriculum was adopted in 1948 for the Sunday schools of the PCUSA.<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup> Since the adoption of this curriculum, succeeding generations of Presbyterians in the PCUSA have been brought up in the neo-orthodox tradition.

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<sup>27</sup> *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).

<sup>28</sup> 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).

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

<sup>30</sup> 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.

### ***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 Communist 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 was 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 professor 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.

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.<sup>31</sup>

## **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.<sup>32</sup> In a similar fashion, the UPCUSA in 1971 gave \$25,000 to the Black Panthers and \$10,000 to the Angela Davis Defense Fund,<sup>33</sup> using money Presbyterians had donated for missions. Occasionally there was widespread opposition to these actions by church leaders. BPC minister Carl McIntire's

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<sup>31</sup> 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!

<sup>32</sup> 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>.

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

nationwide daily radio broadcasts<sup>34</sup> constantly exposed these activities, and the secular press occasionally reported them as well.<sup>35</sup>

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.<sup>36</sup> 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.<sup>37</sup>

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.<sup>38</sup> 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).<sup>39</sup> 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

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<sup>34</sup> 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.

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

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

<sup>37</sup> Carl McIntire sometimes complained, "I've shaken the apples off the tree, but someone else is picking them up!"

<sup>38</sup> 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.

<sup>39</sup> 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).

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.<sup>40</sup>

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

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<sup>40</sup> 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/site/apps/nl/content2.asp?c=fvKVLfMVIsg&b=470745&ct=1571507>.

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.<sup>41</sup> 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 exit.

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 dissension.<sup>42</sup>

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.<sup>43</sup>

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

<sup>42</sup> See the accompanying article by Dennis W. Jowers in this issue of the *WRS Journal*, "The Present State of American Presbyterianism."

<sup>43</sup> 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



### ***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.<sup>44</sup> 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.

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Geneva Theological Seminary, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, Sangre de Cristo Seminary, and Western Reformed Seminary.

<sup>44</sup> See Gary G. Cohen, "The Bible Presbyterian Position on Ecclesiastical Separation," *WRS Journal* 11:2 (August 2004) 5-12.