

American Presbyterian Church History

1900s

“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 or the new orthodoxy. It is in perplexity. It is drifting toward an unknown and a mysterious future.” —C. A. Briggs, Whither? p. 223

I. A Broadening Presbyterian Church

A. Doctrinal Reforms

1. Crux: antipathy toward predestination of strict Calvinism
2. Early attempts
 - a. 1889 - 15 Presbyteries overture for creedal revision
 - b. 1892 - Proposals fail despite ratification by a majority of Presbyteries
3. 1903 Revisions
 - a. Five amendments to the Confession
 - 1) Included 2 new chapters
 - a) “On the Holy Spirit”
 - b) “On the Love of God and Missions”
 - 2) Three Textual changes to the Confession
 - a) XVI:7 “good deeds of men ~~are sinful~~ *fall short of what God requires*”
 - b) XXII:3 OMIT “it is sinful to refuse lawful oaths”
 - c) XXV:6 OMIT “the Pope is the antichrist”
 - b. Declaratory Statement in order to qualify the Confession
 - 1) God’s love for “all mankind”

2) “We believe that all dying in infancy are included In the election of grace, and are regenerated and saved....”

c. Opposed by Warfield and Princeton

d. Ramifications

4. Alarm at growing toleration of modernism

a. Term “modernism” first used in Presbyterian circles, as well as “fundamentalism” (in 1909)

b. 1910 - *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*

1) Two volumes, 31 contributors, 90 articles

2) Cost of publishing and disseminating two million sets was borne by dispensational Presbyterians, Lyman and Milton Stewart of L.A.

3) This was part of an attempt to establish a Fundamentalist “movement”

a) Emphasized the Five Fundamentals

b) Call for prayer bands

“Without *The Fundamentals* the fundamentalist movement in its later self-conscious phases, whether undenominational or denominational, would have been an unlikely development.” —Hutchinson, p. 173

c. “Essential Doctrines” (fundamentals) delineated and reaffirmed by the G.A. in 1910, 1916, & 1923

d. Liberal mentality, in retrospect

“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. Implicit in the reunion of 1869, explicit in the Plea for Peace and Work of 1893, and 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.” — Loetscher, *Broadening Church*, p. 93.

B. Ecclesiastical unions

1. Reunion with the Cumberland Presbyterians, 1906

a. Minority of Cumberlandians remain independent

b. Constitution amended to allow racially segregated Presbyteries till 1967

2. PCUSA and United Presbts. N.A. meet in the FCCC, 1908

a. 1875 - precursor in World Presbyterian Alliance

b. ca. 30 Protestant denominations

c. Socialist “Social Creed of the Churches”

C. Princeton tensions

1. Attempts at some new ideas

a. 1909 – student rebellion vs. anti-practical intellectualism

b. 1914 – progressive J. Ross Stevenson replaces President Francis L. Patton

2. Benjamin B. Warfield (1851-1921)

a. Prof. of Didactic and Polemical Theology (1887ff.)

b. Staunch defender of biblical inerrancy and the Reformed Faith

c. Prolific and cogent writer

3. 1929 - Princeton’s Government Recognized by G.A.

a. Rug pulled on conservative board of directors

b. Liberal Board of Trustees left in total control

D. Bald-faced liberalism and deliberate accommodation

1. Harry Emerson Fosdick: “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” -1922

2. Auburn Affirmation, 1924 (for text, see Rian’s Appendix I)

a. Prompted by 1923 weak reaffirmation (vote of 439-359) of the Fundamentals

- b. Affirmation ascribed by 1,274 ministers out of Auburn, NY
 - 1) Professed allegiance to the Confession
 - 2) Alleged that the 5 fundamentals were only “theories of interpretation”
 - 3) Denied G.A.’s right of laying down any essentials
- 3. 1925 Constitutional Committee to investigate subscriptionism
 - a. Headed by broad churchmen
 - b. 1927 Upshot: The G.A. cannot establish “essential and necessary” articles of belief for ordination, but may examine individual cases in appeal. The inclusivistic position of tolerance under the Auburn Affirmation became the official position of the church.
- 4. Liberal/inclusivist momentum from 1924
- 5. 1929 - Demise of Princeton
- 6. Declension in foreign missions
 - a. 1921 - Robert Speer sweeps under the rug charges of missions heresy
 - b. 1932 - *Rethinking Missions*
 - 1) An interdenominational reassessment of missions in an age of isolationism and modernism: essentially a syncretistic view of Christianity with the world religions.
 - 2) The foreign missions board coddled Pearl Buck
- 7. Ultimately, ecclesiastical utilitarianism leads to intolerance for the conservative minority

“There will be liberty in the Presbyterian Church for Modernists, but non for conservatives; and those who hold the conservative view will have to go elsewhere for the maintenance of those convictions that are dearer than life itself.” —Machen in Hutchinson, p. 206

E. John Gresham Machen, (1881-1937)

- 1. Exposed to higher criticism at Marburg and Gottingen
- 2. Princeton Prof. of NT, 1906-29
- 3. Staunch defender of classic Reformed Theology in particular and historic Christianity in general

a. *Christianity and Liberalism*, 1923

b. Insisted on separatist ecclesiology

“According to Machen, it is not enough to be a fundamentalist in doctrine generally without being a fundamentalist in one’s doctrine of the Church. In fact, one cannot be a true fundamentalist without a separatist view of the Church. For to endorse unbelief is itself unbelief. Those ‘conservatives’ who can tolerate liberalism in the Church are themselves unsound.” —Hutchinson, p. 201

c. 1923 - called for a “New Reformation”

4. Founded Westminster Seminary, 1929

“A really evangelical seminary might be the beginning of a really evangelical Presbyterian Church.”
—Machen

a. Inherited some conservative faculty from Princeton

b. Turbulent early years

1) 1935,6 - majority of the board, unwilling to separate from the old church, resigns with Prof. Allis

2) 1937 - Prof. A.A. MacRae resigns to lead the newly-founded Faith Theological Seminary

5. Founded the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions, 1933

a. After overtures to clean up the FMB were thwarted

b. G.A.’s Mandate of 1934: dissociate from and dissolve IBPFM or face defrocking

1) Refusal to support approved FMB tantamount to refusing to partake of the Lord’s Supper

2) Obedience to the constitutional powers made obedience to Christ

3) The PCUSA purges itself of its conscience: Machen, McIntire, Buswell, H.S. Laird, Paul Wooley, et.al. (see Hutchinson, p. 216 note, for charges vs. Machen)

6. Established Constitutional Covenant Union

a. Alliance of conservatives to attempt internal reforms, or if all else failed, to break from the church in order to continue on as its “true spiritual succession”

b. Official organ: *The Presbyterian Guardian*: offsets the newly-founded *Christianity Today Magazine*

7. Established the Presbyterian Church of America, June 11, 1936

a. PCUSA was declared “officially and judicially apostate”

“We withdrew from the Presbyterian Church USA in order that we might continue to be Presbyterians.” —Machen

b. The Successors adopt the Westminster Confession and PCUSA Constitution of 1934, with the proviso that the 1903 amendments would be dropped

8. Machen dies of pneumonia and a broken heart, January 1, 1937

II. Separating and Reformed

A. Presbyterian Church of America divides and multiplies, 1937

1. Vacuum of strong diplomatic leadership after loss of Machen

2. Two schools struggle for dominance in the womb of development

a. Old School majority

1) Strict confessionalism

2) Insistence on a European Reformed heritage

3) Roots in Princeton

b. New School minority

1) Simple biblical literalism

2) “American” Presbyterianism

a) Nationalistic/patriotic

b) Less centralized—more democratic

c) Personal piety emphasized

3) Identified with broader fundamentalist movement

a) Roots in Princeton and late XIXth Bible Conference Movement

b) Revivalism—emphasis on the individual before God

3. Three Issues of division

a. Eschatology: amil vs. premil

- 1) Two variant schemes of theology?
- 2) Tolerance of premillennialism or parity?

b. Total abstinence vs. full Christian liberty

c. Independent Boards or Church Boards

4. New School dominance of the IBPFM

5. The Bible Presbyterian Church

a. 1937 - Faith Theological Seminary established

b. 1941 - Founding member of Am. Council of Christian Churches

- 1) Behind leadership of Carl McIntire
- 2) To offset liberal FCCC and inclusive NAE (1942)

c. 1948 - Founding member of Int'l Council of Christian Churches

d. A cycle of splits

1) 1956

2) 1971

3) 1976

4) 1984

6. Presbyterian Church of America forced by PCUSA to change its name

- a. 1936 - Litigation filed
- b. 1939 - PCA changes its name to Orthodox Presbyterian Church rather than appeal —See Rian’s Appendixes 24,25 for essence of the court brief and decision

B. Christian Reformed Convulsions (founded 1857)

1. Continuing tensions and alliances among varying parties originating in Holland

- a. Pietists: out of anti-establishment Dutch conventicles
- b. Confessionalists: e.g., Louis Berkhof
- c. Antitheticals: insulation of the elect from the seed of the serpent, e.g., Herman Hoeksema
- d. Neo-Calvinists: followed Abraham Kuyper’s progressive views on church and culture

2. Identity crisis during and after WWI: The Americanization of the CRC

3. Showdown in the ‘20s: The “Common Grace Question”

- a. Preceded by conservative purge of higher criticism at Calvin College, 1920-22
- b. Promoted by Neo-Calvinists in an effort to relate to their world and to salvage cultural institutions for the glory of God
- c. Resisted by Antitheticals (and some pietists)

“It is utterly inconceivable that God can show any grace at all [except] in the blood of Christ Jesus” —Herman Hoeksema

d. Confessionalists abandon Antitheticals as too close to Anabaptism

Can one say “...that the marriage between two non-Christians can be nothing more than bestiality and the sort of love that devils have for each other!! This is nonsense. It conflicts with Scripture and experience.” — J. K. Van Baalen in Bratt, p. 111

e. 1924 - “Common Grace Synod” commands Hoeksema, et al., to desist

1) 1926 - Hoeksema helps establish the Protestant Reformed Church

2) 1928 - CRC hedges its common grace doctrine by legislating vs. worldliness: dancing,

gambling, and theater.

4. Dutch contributions to the Princeton tradition

- a. 1893 - Geerhardus Vos
- b. Abraham Kuyper's "Lectures on Calvinism" during Stone Lecture Series
- c. R.B. Kuyper and Cornelius van Til at Westminster

5. Later tensions over the nature and authority of Scripture (early 70s) leaves progressives and Barthians in control of the CRC

III. More Recent Developments

A. Merger Mania

1. 1958 - merger of United PCNA with PCUSA —> UPCUSA

- a. Dialogue since end of civil war
- b. Negotiations since 1951
- c. Exploratory talks included proposed reunion with Southern Presbyterians

2. 1962 - Consultation on Church Union (COCU, almost Coocoo)

"... the General Assembly invited the Protestant Episcopal Church to join with it in inviting the Methodist Church and the United Church of Christ to consider establishing a united church truly Catholic, truly Reformed, and truly Evangelical." —Loetscher, *Brief History...*, p. 183

- a. The latter group was a 1957 mixture of Stonites, German Reformed Synods, and Congregational Associations
- b. Conservatives (low church evangelicals) had abandoned the Episcopal Church in 1873 to establish the Reformed Episcopal Church
- c. Nine denominations in discussions by 1968
- d. 1970 Plan of Union
 - 1) Centralized "bishops"
 - 2) Parish councils would oversee member congregations

3. 1965 - Evangelical Presbyterian Church (out of '56 BP Split) merges with well-established RPCNA to form RPC, Evangelical Synod

4. 1982 - RPCES absorbed by new Presbyterian Church in America

5. 1983 - Reunion of United PCUSA (North) with PCUS (South): returns to original name of PCUSA

6. 1973 - One last split to preserve a spiritual succession: PCinA organizes out of southern PCUS

B. "The Death of a Church:" The Confession of 1967 of the UPCUSA

1. Ratified by 88% of the Presbyteries

2. Discarded "verbose" Westminster Larger Catechism after discussion to scrap the entire old confession; added three other Reformation confessions and one German theological declaration from the era of Nazi persecution

3. Ambiguous language deliberately used to accommodate plurality of liberals and consciousness conservatives

4. A Christocentric confession with the main theme of "reconciliation"

"God's redeeming work in Jesus Christ embraces the whole of man's life: social and cultural, economic and political, scientific and technological, individual and corporate." —in Loetscher, p. 164

5. Diluted ordination vows

a. Any remaining force of the 1729 Adopting Act was emasculated.

Instead of "Do you sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith and the Catechisms of this Church as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures?"; now read, "Will you perform the duties of a minister of the gospel in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of the Scriptures and under the continuing guidance of the confessions of this Church?"

b. The infallible Scriptures circumvented

Instead of "Do you believe the Scriptures of the OT and NT to be the Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice?"; now read, "Do you accept the Scriptures of the OT and NT to be the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church catholic, and by the HS, God's Word to you?"

For analysis, see Carl McIntire's *The Death of a Church*

C. Agitations within conservative Presbyterianism over covenant and justification, 1980 to present

1. Dr. Norman Shepherd at Westminster Seminary, Philadelphia
2. Auburn Avenue Federal Vision