

The Formation and Progress of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA)¹

In dealing with the history of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), I must confess not only a certain nostalgia but also the fact that I was privileged to be an observer of many of the things that led to the formation of a separate branch of the visible church in 1973. It seems hard to believe that we are now more than four decades removed from many of those key events.

There are many reasons to consider the PCA. For one thing, the PCA is a major player—it is the largest evangelical Presbyterian denomination in the United States; it has a large missionary force; it was a founder of the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC); and it has many influential ministries and ministers. Secondly, looking at the PCA gives insight into Southern Presbyterianism. And thirdly, there is a connection between the PCA and the Presbyterian Church of Japan.

In order to understand the formation of the PCA, we first must appreciate the background in the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS), known informally as the Southern Presbyterian Church.

On December 4, 1861, representatives of presbyteries from throughout the South gathered at First Presbyterian Church, Augusta, Georgia, in order to form a new denomination, which at first was called the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America (PCCSA). The particular issue causing the division had to do with the requirement imposed by the Northern-dominated Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. General Assembly of pledging allegiance to the Federal government in Washington, D.C. This was in the midst of the War for Southern Independence, and a time when most Southerners had pledged their allegiance to their various states which had seceded from the Federal Union and had formed the Confederate States of America (CSA). This ecclesiastical separation would last for 122 years, when the two main branches of Presbyterianism north and south would reunite.

However, in the meantime, liberalism or modernism made significant inroads into the Northern Presbyterian Church, and eventually into its Southern counterpart. Given the greater conservative nature of Presbyterianism, and of society generally, in the South, the liberalizing trend took significantly longer in that section of the country. Nevertheless, the move toward rejection of the teaching of Scripture was powerful, and it would eventually gain in strength, particularly in the urban areas of the South, and in the PCUS academic institutions. Furthermore, starting in the late nineteenth century and continuing into the twentieth, there were numerous efforts at reuniting the PCUSA and the PCUS. In general terms, those promoting ecclesiastical union in the PCUS were liberal in their theology, and thereby were in favor of a reunited denomination since it would be less conservative than the PCUS.

The issue of reunion between the Southern and Northern Presbyterian Churches, therefore, was a critical one. If conservatives lost the merger battle, then there was no reasonable hope for spiritual reformation. On the other hand, if the liberals could be thwarted in their pro-union efforts, then, perhaps, it was thought, they would eventually give up, voluntarily leave the PCUS, and align with the PCUSA.

In 1954, a three-way merger was voted on by the PCUS, the PCUSA, and the United Presbyterian Church of North America. The United Presbyterian Church represented former Associate and Reformed Presbyterian branches, which had themselves merged in 1858, and which had for awhile maintained strict doctrinal and worship standards until abandoning them earlier in the twentieth century. This three-way merger was approved by the Northern Presbyterian Church and the United Presbyterian Church, but was defeated when voted on by the Southern Presbyterian presbyteries. Four years later, the PCUSA and the UPCNA did consummate union when they formed the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (UPCUSA).

Meanwhile, the battle for the soul of the Southern Presbyterian Church continued. Eventually, that war was lost by the conservative side. And many of the conservatives thereupon decided in the early 1970s that it was time to leave the old Southern Church and form a new denomination.

¹ For a full-length treatment of the formation and progress of the PCA, see Frank J. Smith, *The History of the Presbyterian Church in America: The Silver Anniversary Edition* (Lawrenceville, Ga.: Presbyterian Scholars Press, 1999).

There are at least eight categories of issues which drove men to take this momentous step. These categories are as follows: Ecclesiology, Ecclesiastical-Political Considerations, Ecumenical Relations, Theology, Morals, Missions, Liturgy, and Violations of the Church's Constitution. These are not hard and fast categories, as often there would be overlap from one to the other. Nevertheless, we can say that these are the basic areas of concern and disagreement.

Ecclesiology

The Southern Presbyterian Church, reflecting its Puritan roots, held, to use a Latin term, to *jure divino* Presbyterianism--that is, the belief that church government is divinely ordered, and that Presbyterianism is the pattern which is prescribed. However, the denomination had become involved with several other mainline Protestant churches in the Consultation on Church Union (COCU), later known as Churches of Christ Uniting. As the Southern Church moved in a more ecumenical direction, there was the very real fear that she would surrender her Presbyterian distinctives for a type of episcopacy.

Even apart from a formal merger with non-Presbyterian churches, the Southern Church was moving away from the notion that the church herself, through her courts, was the divine instrument for ministry. Increasingly, the church was turning over its functions to semi-autonomous boards. This, too, marked a departure from the original tenets of the denomination, and made a number of people long for the restoration of the old system of thought.

There was also the danger of losing that Southern Presbyterian distinctive of the spirituality of the church. Increasingly, the church that had been formed because she did not want to put Caesar in Christ's place, was becoming enmeshed in political and economic disputes. Among these were the advocacy of civil disobedience (particularly with regard to the "civil rights" movement), and opposition to the Vietnam War.

Ecclesiastical-Political Considerations

One of the concerns was the possibility of merger with the more-liberal United Presbyterian Church (UPCUSA). Already, through union presbyteries and union synods, UPCUSA officers were able to serve in PCUS courts, including the General Assembly.

The gerrymandering of presbytery and synod boundaries was purportedly going to make it easier to foster a left-wing agenda. The sweeping restructure of the Southern Church in the early 1970s caused great unease on the part of many conservatives.

There was also great concern over the matter of church property. Attempts by the denomination to keep churches within the fold only made for greater resolve to leave before the door was totally shut on the ability of a congregation to retain ownership of its property.

Ecumenical Relations

Besides participation in the Consultation on Church Union, the PCUS held membership in the National Council of Churches (NCC) and the World Council of Churches (WCC). Both of these organizations were heavily influenced in a left-ward direction, both theologically and politically. Conservatives tried for many years to withdraw the PCUS from these ecumenical bodies.

Theology

There were numerous doctrinal deviations about which to be concerned. The PCUS herself had not formally abandoned the great creeds and confessions of the church. But in practice--as in the literature coming from the denomination, the teaching being inculcated in the seminaries and schools, and the toleration of unbelief in the church's courts--doctrines such as the virgin birth of Christ were being called into question. The atonement, the doctrine of election (predestination), the nature of Scripture, and the simple and prescribed worship of their Presbyterian forebears were ridiculed. Subscription to the system of doctrine was denied; the 1972 Southern Presbyterian General Assembly admitted that the Church "operates with a detailed *Confession*, the 'fundamentals' of which are interpreted with considerable latitude."

The foundational reason for the controversy came from the fact that denominational seminaries and colleges, along with denominational publications, were promulgating a different view of Scripture from that of the Southern Presbyterian founders. Belief in doctrines such as inerrancy, infallibility, and inspiration of the Bible was not only not taught: it was often ridiculed.

Morals

There were numerous moral concerns that accompanied the dismay over the theological state of the church. Laxness in divorce, advocacy of civil disobedience, and most especially the promotion of abortion reflected the situational ethics of the time.

Missions

In order for Southern Presbyterian conservatives to remain in the denomination, they had to be comfortable in giving support to the missionaries. However, the Southern Presbyterian Church started to go away from the old-fashioned gospel, and to adopt a social gospel. Instead of emphasis on evangelism, the focus was now on such things as feeding the hungry, or social justice.

Moreover, conservatives were concerned about the equalization of funds (whereby money given to specific causes only reduced the undesignated funds which would go to those causes, thereby freeing up undesignated funds for left-wing causes). Furthermore, the recall of conservative missionaries helped drive many of the conservatives in the Southern Church to seek another affiliation.

Liturgy

When it began in 1861, the Southern Presbyterian Church was committed to a Puritan-type worship. The style was simple. Much emphasis was placed on the reading and preaching of the Word, and lengthy pastoral prayers were the norm. Although psalmody had largely been replaced by hymnody, musical instrumentation was not heard in her sanctuaries until after the War for Southern Independence and Reconstruction; the innovation of instrumentation came in with a sensualistic movement which swept the country. Significant segments of the Southern Presbyterian Church became enamored with Episcopalian-type liturgy.

Not having a settled liturgical tradition was not helpful to the promotion of unity within the church. However, by the 1960s, the experimental worship which was in vogue exacerbated the situation. Old-fashioned Calvinists in the Southern Church were adamantly opposed to the hand-clapping, psychedelic worship services which denominational agencies were fostering. Snake-dancing in the aisles at a communion service was seen as not being compatible with the historic Presbyterian faith, and the leaders who helped form the Continuing Presbyterian Church viewed practices such as these as signs of apostasy.

Violations of the Church's Constitution

Many of these matters involved violations of the Constitution of the Southern Presbyterian Church. The conservatives who helped form the new denomination therefore appealed to the Constitutional Standards in making the case that separation was the honorable option.

The Continuing Church Movement

But being upset about things and taking action are two different matters. In order to engage in concerted action, conservatives banded together in various organizations whose purpose was the reform of the Southern Church, and only later became ecclesiastical separation.

The four organizations which formed the Continuing Presbyterian Church Movement are these: *Presbyterian Journal*; Presbyterian Evangelistic Fellowship; Concerned Presbyterians, Inc.; and Presbyterian Churchmen United. Before we move on to consider each of these groups, we need to point out that there were other organizations within the denomination which played different roles. For example, there were neutral groups, such as Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi. This seminary, founded in the mid-1960s to train ministers for

conservative churches, contributed to the evangelical atmosphere, but never officially committed to the Continuing Church. There were middle-of-the-roaders, exemplified by the Covenant Fellowship of Presbyterians, composed of people who were evangelicals but not as conservative as those in the Continuing Church movement. And there were liberal groups, which worked for the radicalization of the church. At least some of their operations were clandestine. The *Presbyterian Outlook* led the charge. A secret organization known as the Fellowship of St. James served as a discussion group, while the Fellowship of Concern was a blatantly political organization formed in the mid-1960s to further the liberal cause.

The Presbyterian Journal

Founded in 1942 as a monthly publication, the *Southern Presbyterian Journal* appeared at a time when Progressivism had triumphed throughout most of the country. The one place where liberal theology had not won was the South. However, the War for Southern Independence and Reconstruction several generations previously had taken their toll. The intellectual giants of nineteenth-century Southern Presbyterianism--James Henley Thornwell, John Lafayette Girardeau, and Robert Lewis Dabney--were not replaced by men of equal stature. This created an intellectual vacuum in the Southern Church in the early twentieth century. By the 1930s, many academically-inclined churchmen, having adopted the perspective of Progressivism, were intent on bringing their allegedly benighted area out of obscurity and into intellectual and moral respectability. A "New South," informed politically by Progressivism and religiously by an Enlightenment approach to Scripture, was emerging, and with it an attempt to reshape the church in Dixie.

But this attempt to change Southern religion would not come without a fight. And this battle would especially be joined in the 1940s within the Southern Presbyterian Church, a denomination which historically had wielded great influence throughout the region.

As early as 1936, conservative church in the Southern Presbyterian Church had discussed the possibility of a new publication. Notice that date, 1936, which is significant for several reasons. One, in that year, J. Gresham Machen and others had finally been defrocked by the Northern Presbyterian Church for their opposition to liberalism. Two, politically, the New Deal was in full swing. And three, overseas, totalitarian regimes were threatening liberty world-wide.

One of the key board members was Dr. L. Nelson Bell, a Southern Presbyterian medical missionary to China who had been forced to return to the U.S. because of the Japanese invasion of China. His daughter Ruth would later marry a certain evangelist by the name of Billy Graham.

In the very first issue, May 1942, the magazine declared that it was marching under four banners: "the blue banner of covenanted loyalty to Christ as the only King in Zion, the only Head of His body the Church; the banner of His holy Word; the banner of the Westminster Standards which testify to His saving grace and sovereign glory; the banner of missions as the mission of the Church." But the publication was also founded because of a concern that even the current crisis of world war was due in part to the failure of the Christian Church to be faithful in its proclamation of the gospel. Indeed, in those early dark days of World War II, the very first issue of the *Journal* editorialized that the "civilization of which we are a part is perched precariously on the edge of an abyss. . . . The tragedy is that, in part, the Christian Church is to blame."

"It is to blame in so far as it has left its God-given task of preaching the Gospel of salvation from sin through the Lord Jesus Christ.

"It is to blame in so far as it has turned from faith in, and the preaching of the Bible as truly and wholly the Word of God, condoning preaching and teaching calculated to question or destroy this precious faith.

"It is to blame where it has substituted for the Gospel of redemption a programme of social reform.

"It is to blame to the extent to which it has stepped out of its spiritual role, to meddle, as the Church, in political and economic matters and affairs of State.

"It is to blame where, as has so often been the case, the Gospel message has been diluted and made pleasant to the taste of unregenerate man; denying the fact of and the heinousness of sin, and the certain doom of the unrepentant sinner.

"But despite these failures of the Church, a return to a faithful ministry of the Truth can yet, by the power of the Holy Spirit, provide the spiritual and moral stamina which is essential for world stabilization."

The same editorial stated that the "underlying and fundamental issue is the integrity of the Scriptures. . . . Germany today is living proof of the devastating effect of destructive criticism. Faith cometh by hearing the Word of God, and this faith brings individual and national righteousness."

The ecumenical movement, as manifest in the Federal Council of Churches (predecessor to the National Council of Churches) was symptomatic of this root problem.

"The Federal Council has caused confusion and resentment by constant meddling, in the name of the Church, in economic, social and racial matters, and in the affairs of State. There is incontrovertible evidence that prior to our entry into the present war this organization used every available means to hamper the efforts of our Government to prepare for the conflict which seemed inevitable. Now that we are in the war, this same Council is already preparing the terms of peace which it proposes to foster. Little wonder that some turn from the Church in distress and even resentment."

The other major ecumenical thrust, that of merger with the Northern Church, was also opposed, as "another symptom of the misunderstanding of the mission of the Church. . . . The proper sequence, outlined by James, is still the right sequence, 'First pure, then peaceable.'"

We can conclude, therefore, that this nascent publication was dedicated to saving world civilization, by means of resorting to the old-fashioned message of the gospel and the Church's reliance on a spiritual sword. In a day when the Southern Presbyterian doctrine of the spirituality of the church was being called into question, the publication maintained that the Church's mission is "spiritual and redemptive, and that it should not be used to promote the political, economic and social teachings of any group or extra church organization, on which Christian men have a right to differ, and which are outside the Church's responsibility as an evangelizing agency."

In accord with its commitment to the Westminster Standards, the Journal advocated a strict subscription to them. In 1949, the magazine said regarding theological subscription, ". . . if a creed is based on the Bible, and demonstrably so, it may be accepted as final, without any assumption or admission or charge of infallibility, as regards the minds of the generation that framed the creed. This is particularly true if and as their creed is an organism, logical, articulated, a balanced system of belief. And such indeed is the Westminster Creed. Hence they are wrong indeed who claim that we are wedded too much to a 17th century creed and are living in the shadows of the past! We are living in the truth of the Bible that does not pass away!"

This strict subscriptionist position affected many areas, including the doctrine of worship. A 1948 article, "The New Altar," took a strong stand in favor of what has been called the "regulative principle of worship." The article said, "[The Church] is in a world which has many new forms and ceremonies, in themselves often attractive, to tempt her from the path of obedience, and from the spiritual worship laid down in the Scripture. Sad to say in many instances [she] seems to be yielding to this seduction, and on the pretext of adorning the service in such a way as to attract people to them. . . . If the attraction of people is the purpose of the service, then by all means let us go all the way and put on a good show that will compete with the attraction and amusement of the world." The article also said, "It is high time, many believe, for the Church to restudy the matter of public worship, not from the aesthetic and popular viewpoint, but as to what pleases God. We are no more left to our inclination and taste in fashioning altars and crosses and candles than was Ahab in fashioning his altar."

The publication's finest hour may have been its successful effort to defeat the union of the Presbyterian Church in the United States with the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America and the United Presbyterian church of North America in the early 1950s. The *Journal* kept up a steady drumbeat to demonstrate the liberalism of the Northern Presbyterian Church and the practical, devastating effects of union.

As early as 1944, while World War II was still being fought, W. Calvin Wells from Mississippi wrote a twelve-page article on "Church Union." Seven pages were dedicated to the issue of purity of doctrine; Wells used the following quote as ammunition: "It is not the wording of a creed, but the interpretation, that matters. Any doctrinal statement agreeable to the U.S.A. Church must be interpreted in the light of the conditions and practices of that church, rather than in the protestations of the committees in conference. The meaning of a creed to a church is evidenced by the interpretation of those who subscribe to the creed." In making his case, Wells discussed the Auburn Affirmation, a

paper signed by more than a thousand Northern Presbyterian ministers, which declared that the five fundamentals of the faith--the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, the virgin birth of Christ, His sacrificial death, His bodily resurrection, and His working of miracles--were simply theories to which one did not have to subscribe in order to be a minister in good standing in the Presbyterian Church.

In 1945, conservatives founded the Continuing Church Committee. Among the developments which would make the future intolerable for Southern Presbyterians were the following: diminishing the parity of the eldership; women's ordination; restructuring into regional synods; creation of a General Council (i.e., an overarching administrative board for the denomination); changes in property laws, introducing an emphasis on social issues akin to that in the Northern Presbyterian Church.

In 1959, Dr. G. Aiken Taylor became editor of the magazine, which dropped "Southern" from the name, so that it now became simply, "*Presbyterian Journal*." Over the course of the next decade and beyond, the publication continued to sound the alarm of the increasing apostasy in the Southern Church.

Every year, there would a Journal Day, held in western North Carolina where the publication had its offices, at which hundreds of people from around the denomination would come. In the 1969 rally, Ruling Elder Jack Williamson declared that the Reformed faith was not negotiable. He admitted that Concerned Presbyterians had been disturbing the "peace" of the Church, but they had done so by pointing out existent heresy in order to preserve the Church's "purity."

At Journal Day in 1970, the main message was that "There will be a Continuing Presbyterian Church"--an assurance which was greeted with warm enthusiasm by the more than 550 people who had come from 15 states.

The next Journal Day, in August 1971, was the occasion for the formal announcement that four organizations--the Journal, Concerned Presbyterians, Presbyterian Evangelistic Fellowship, and Presbyterian Churchmen United--had banded together to form a Steering Committee for a Continuing Presbyterian Church. "We sincerely believe that the Holy Spirit is leading us in this direction," declared the Steering Committee. "We know that any result which is pleasing to Almighty God shall not be accomplished by our might, nor by our power but by His Spirit. Therefore, we urge and implore you to undergird this effort daily with much prayer that God will fill us with His Holy Spirit to guide us in this tremendous undertaking." According to the *Journal*, those gathered for the meeting "gave an almost unanimous standing ovation to the announcement that the various conservative organizations . . . have decided 'to accept the apparent inevitability of division of the PCUS, caused by the program of the radical ecumenists, and to move now toward a continuing body of congregations and presbyteries loyal to the Scriptures and the Westminster standards.'"

Jack Williamson proclaimed that the warnings over many years had not been heeded by the PCUS, and that the denomination had become "both *de facto* and *de jure* apostate." The major issue "is the authority and integrity of the Bible." The Alabama attorney pleaded that conservatives "must move together. Although we are saved as individuals, we are called into a corporate fellowship, the Church of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. One of the great problems for men and women of courage and conviction is their fierce individualism. This tends to create an independence which is detrimental to our corporate fellowship."

This stance for ecclesiastical separation brought a painful yet amicable parting of the ways. In his last column, Dr. L. Nelson Bell, one of the founders of the magazine, wrote that there was no doctrinal issue imminently before the church, either in terms of ecclesiastical merger or a watered-down Confession of Faith. Therefore, while he still had freedom to do so, he believed that he needed to be in the church bearing witness to the truth.

Meanwhile, Aiken Taylor was pleading for conservatives to act together, rather than to "fly off in all directions immediately" in reaction to "some intemperate liberal action." In his estimation, apart from prayer, the most important attitude to be cultivated was that of a "firm determination to plan together, work together and stick together."

In the October 13, 1971, issue, the *Journal* carried several articles which argued for the need for ecclesiastical separation. In "How We Got Where We Are," the editor traced the decline of the Southern Presbyterian Church through ten years of Assembly, agency, presbytery, and congregational actions.

For example, the 1970 Assembly favored abortion for economic and other reasons, supported a magazine which had advocated sex and marijuana for teens, and refused to condemn the "Black Manifesto."

Several presbyteries had ordained ministers who made fun of the virgin birth and denied the substitutionary atonement of Christ. One presbytery said that it is false to hold a view of the atonement in which Jesus is seen as separated from His Father and suffering punishment. In another presbytery, a man who had earlier flatly denied the resurrection of Christ, was ordained with the "lifting up of hands"--those presbyters participating in the ordination service put their hands under him and hoisted him in the air.

A North Carolina congregation invited its television audience to join in the Lord's Supper by going to the refrigerator to "get a beverage and a piece of bread and unite with those who partake in the sanctuary." Mention was made of jazz worship services in churches. The Board of National Ministries "New Ways" conference shocked the Montreat community--Montreat, N.C., was the denominational conference grounds--with face masks at a Sunday morning experimental worship service, and a hand-clapping communion service at night.

An article for an adult Sunday school curriculum advocated one-world government, unilateral disarmament, and surrender of United States sovereignty. Another Sunday school publication said that the basic economic theory of Marxism is also fundamental Christian economic theory.

Harvey Cox, as principal speaker at the Richmond (Va.) Youth Quadrennial in 1965, called for the secularization of the church. The Atlanta (Ga.) Youth Quadrennial in 1969 was marked by obscenity and a leader's ridicule of students who asked for prayer. A Sunday school curriculum book made "situational ethics" official for the Presbyterian Church in the United States. One of the study book offered for use during the "witness season" by the Board of World Missions was on ways of co-existence with other faiths--one story had a Christian girl marrying a Hindu boy with a Unitarian minister and a Brahmin priest officiating.

A PCUS college professor launched a personal statement of faith by saying, "God is dead, but don't worry, the Virgin is pregnant again . . . there is no such thing as a pure faith, a pure religion, a pure moral decision." A professor of Bible at a PCUS college said that Jesus was married and probably had children.

Thirty-three top leaders of the denomination signed a statement in support of the Consultation on Church Union, saying that Presbyterianism, as such, must be done away with, to be replaced with "a new creation that is truly new because it is of the Lord's making."

After the PCA's founding in 1973, the *Presbyterian Journal* found that it had to redefine itself, and move from being a cheerleader for the Continuing Church Movement, to focusing on the conservative Presbyterian denominations, including the PCA; the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod, and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. In the 1980s, the magazine's publication of articles from Pentecostal magazines and openness to the charismatic movement caused consternation for many of the publication's traditional supporters. Its emphasis on rejecting what it perceived as dead orthodoxy often brought criticism from those it caricatured as "TR" ("Truly Reformed").

Perhaps the most well-known example of attack on the conservative wing of the PCA was the Editor's article, "Lo, the TR!", published in March 1977. Dr. Taylor suggested that those men who were determined to have a pure congregation were destined to have a small flock. He maintained that "if you have certain convictions and the people you work with do not share those convictions (whether fellow presbyters, or members of the flock), you have a *selling* job as well as a disciplining job." He exhorted the TR to understand that the "commandment not to offend one of Christ's little ones is fully as incumbent upon him as the commandment to feed His sheep." The PCA was formed in reaction against a rampant liberalism, where Scripture was ignored, the gospel perverted, and Christ dishonored; but "it is quite another thing to adjust to a religion which to the uninitiated appears as strait-jacketed as that of the strictest Pharisee."

Over the course of the next ten years, subscriptions to the magazine steadily fell, causing the *Journal* to cease publishing in 1987. Some of that was due to the fact that, with the formation of the PCA, there was not as much need for news about the latest outrage among liberal Presbyterians. However, it is also true that by the end, the *Journal* had changed significantly its editorial policy. In the February 4, 1987, edition, the magazine carried an

article which advocated "newer practices" of worship, including liturgical dance. But dissatisfaction had been building for awhile. A letter-writer from Georgia cancelled her subscription in 1985 with these words: ". . . I don't believe it is necessary for a conservative publication to give equal time to opposing viewpoints. If I want liberal viewpoints and theology, there are plenty of places to find them." She continued: "If a conservative publication gives equal time to liberal viewpoints, what kind of publication is it?"

The parent corporation, already heavily invested in the promotion of a Christian world-and-life view for children (*God's World*), changed its name to God's World Publications, and launched *World* magazine. *World* has become highly-regarded as a news source for conservatives and Christians. The old *Southern Presbyterian Journal*, with its focus on the reform of a regional denomination, had metamorphosed into a broad-spectrum Calvinistic magazine focused on the reform of society.

And yet, the transition is not that difficult to explain when one considers that there had always been an expansive outlook to the *Journal*. Although focused on the Southern Presbyterian Church, the magazine often commented on national and international affairs, both ecclesiastical and secular. L. Nelson Bell's long missionary service in China undoubtedly aided this more-than-provincial view.

At least some of the broader vista looked out over the rising Red tide. The *Journal* took a definite anti-Communist stance. The magazine was also adept at pointing out the Communist subversion in the Church.

And that global perspective has implications for how to view the ecclesiastical separation that led to the establishment of the PCA. There are scholars who have suggested that the formation of the PCA was largely a manifestation of cultural and social concerns among Southern churchmen. Explaining the situation in terms of Southern provincialism is simply inadequate, for at least three reasons: one, the concern voiced by Aiken Taylor, and others, regarding the world-wide implications of the contemporary struggle between Good and Evil; two, the positive thrust by the new denomination to break out of Dixie (the Southern states) and reach out to the entire nation and to the entire world with the gospel; and three, the fact that a significant proportion of ministers in the new church from its beginning were not originally from the South.

The *Journal* was the communications arm of the Continuing Church Movement. The publication acquainted people with the issues, developed a network of conservatives, brought the story of the church's departure from orthodoxy into the open, and told its constituents who the players in the struggle were. Without its ministry, there would have been no Continuing Presbyterian Church.

But more than that, the *Journal's* articulation of the world-wide nature of the conflict helped shape the vision of the budding denomination. This would guarantee that both in perception and in reality, what the Continuing Church leaders were doing was more than just a tempest in a teapot, but would have intercontinental effects.

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The second group which formed the Steering Committee for a Continuing Presbyterian Church was Presbyterian Evangelistic Fellowship (PEF). This organization traces its roots to the Rev. Bill Hill, a minister small in stature who was crippled by juvenile rheumatoid arthritis from the age of three, but who was still a giant of a man. From 1929 to 1958, Bill Hill grew the West End Presbyterian Church in the blue-collar town of Hopewell, Virginia, to become a prominent PCUS congregation. In 1958, he resigned that pastorate in order to become an itinerant evangelist throughout the PCUS. Six years later, in 1964, Presbyterian Evangelistic Fellowship was formally organized.

PEF's contribution to the conservative cause has several aspects. First, the organization, obviously, was engaged in preaching the gospel throughout the South and particularly in the PCUS. This resulted in many conversions and many re-commitments to Christ.

(Let me add, as an aside, that I personally remember hearing Bill Hill preach at a football stadium in the small town of Hope Mills, North Carolina, where my father was a PCUS pastor. My father had helped to arrange Mr. Hill to preach at a community service, with other churches, such as Baptist and Methodist, participating. When the

evangelist pointed his crooked, bony finger, you knew he was pointing right at you. I think that everyone in the football stadium at the close of the service "came forward" for salvation or rededication.)

Secondly, PEF, starting in 1969, began sponsoring an evangelism conference each summer at Montreat, North Carolina, conference grounds of the PCUS. The first conference attracted several hundred, and each year, to the great embarrassment of the PCUS leadership, attendance grew steadily. These conferences featured numerous seminars on evangelism, numerous ministries, and other topics, as well as a preaching service and rally every night. Rousing singing of good old gospel songs, to the accompaniment of lively organ and piano playing, was the order-of-the-day at the nightly service held in the cool of the spacious rock-built auditorium. These services usually lasted a couple of hours and inevitably ended with the invitation to come forward to receive Christ, rededicate one's life, make a commitment to go into full-time Christian work, or make some other decision. These week-long events helped spark excitement about evangelism among Presbyterians. They also brought together fellow conservatives and served as a rallying point.

Thirdly, PEF published *Come . . . Follow*. This magazine featured articles on evangelism and on reasons why a pure church is necessary for the work of the gospel, as well as reports on evangelistic services held around the country.

Fourthly, PEF established world and home mission agencies for carrying out the Great Commission. In 1969, Ben Wilkinson and Jimmy Lyons traveled to Mexico and returned alarmed at the state of evangelism there. In January 1970, the PEF board authorized its executive committee to appoint a commission to investigate the advisability of starting overseas evangelism. Shortly thereafter, the Executive Commission on Overseas Evangelism (ECOЕ, pronounced "echo") was formed. At their first meeting, the directors of ECOЕ stayed up until the wee hours of the morning to make a momentous decision. ECOЕ would actually commission missionaries, not just seek support for PCUS personnel facing recall because of their conservative views and because of decreasing funds. The men of ECOЕ knew that their decision to send out missionaries would bring the ire of the denomination. They also knew that they could very well face judicial charges for this bold plan. Already Bill Hill was being given the image of "the Gresham Machen of the Southern Presbyterian Church." (J. Gresham Machen was disciplined by the Northern Presbyterian Church because of his involvement in the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions.)

Though no disciplinary measures were ever carried out against these men of ECOЕ, the 1971 Southern Presbyterian General Assembly did adopt a report which contained several charges (implicit and explicit) against ECOЕ. This action led to a stirring defense of ECOЕ and PEF which Jimmy Lyons, a bona fide Choctaw Indian chief from Oklahoma, delivered in Montreat during the PEF conference later that summer.

As the PCA came into existence, PEF voluntarily gave its home missions and world missions agencies to the new denomination. The name of Mission to the United States was later changed to Mission to North America, but Mission to the World remains the name for the PCA's world missions arm. Despite this generosity, and despite the fact that PEF was one of the four organizations which gave birth to the PCA, the daughter denomination has not always been appreciative of the organization.

PEF, however, went its way, and has continued to expand its ministry. Today, scores of evangelists, associate evangelists, affiliate evangelists, and other staff workers labor under the PEF banner.

The Presbyterian Evangelistic Fellowship remains true in its commitment to this bit verse written by Bill Hill based upon the prophet Ezekiel:

People scattered here and there go on each day in sin,
Christians see, but too few care, or strive their souls to win,
O watchman, tell the message true, or if thou shirk thy holy task,
Their blood will I require of you when I shall come with trumpet blast.

The third organization that brought the PCA into existence was Concerned Presbyterians, Inc. This group of laymen (basically non-clergy officers) was formed in January 1965 to combat the growing liberalism in the PCUS.

In its early days, the organization drafted Kenneth S. Keyes, well-known Florida realtor, to be its president. Keyes' real estate company was one of the largest in the South, and helped make him a millionaire. He was saved under Dan Iverson's ministry at the famed Shenandoah Presbyterian Church in Miami, Florida. Being a convert of Pastor Dan, he learned from the start the meaning of Christian commitment, including tithing. Mr. Keyes had written tracts on tithing and stewardship, and had spoken throughout the South on these topics. When asked to head this group, he knew that taking on this task would mean that he would have to give up his business. He thought initially that it would take about ten years to get the church back on track.

Roy LeCraw of Atlanta, Georgia, was the vice-president. Col. LeCraw was a former mayor of Atlanta. The secretary was Jack Williamson, an attorney from Alabama. Jules Vroon, who worked as comptroller for the Keyes Co., was the treasurer.

One of the strengths of Concerned Presbyterians was its network of people. Field directors helped to coordinate the efforts of dozens of men on the synod and presbytery levels.

In a pamphlet entitled *Are You a Concerned Presbyterian?*, the organization stated that it was "'fed up' with the social gospel which is being preached from so many Protestant pulpits today," and was causing "thousands of dedicated Christians" to leave their churches which they "love and have faithfully supported over the years." The pamphlet then noted the steady loss of growth in the PCUS, including the fact that over one-third of the congregations did not record one profession of faith in 1969, and concluded that such a decline was due to the influence of liberals in places of denominational leadership. The pamphlet said,

"It is our avowed purpose to return the control of the Church once more to those who feel that the primary mission of the Church is to lead the unsaved to Christ, who believe in the integrity and authority of the Bible, who consider loyalty to the Confession of Faith and the Catechisms vital and essential and who are not willing to have our Church destroyed by merger with bodies not committed to these beliefs.

"If this cannot be accomplished within a reasonable period we will be working to form a new Church which will be faithful to the Word of God and loyal to Presbyterian doctrine and polity--a Church in which those who love the Lord and seek to serve Him will be happy to have a part."

One of the important early documents which helps illustrate Concerned Presbyterians' strategy is entitled "Confidential Advisory No. 1: Recommended Plan of Organization and Activities for Local Chapters or Groups of Concerned Presbyterians." Even at this early date (August 25, 1965), both the concern and the strategic activity of Concerned Presbyterians are clear. First, there was a recognition of the fact that the battle would be won or lost at the grass roots level. Secondly, the paper noted that ruling elders must be won over by loving, persuasive heart-to-heart talks, not by bombastic arguments. Thirdly, it was acknowledged, by emphasis on prayer, that except the Lord build the house they labor in vain to build it. Fourthly, Concerned Presbyterians recognized the importance of co-operation and co-ordination of conservative effort (for example, the encouragement to increase *Presbyterian Journal* subscriptions, and to consult with conservative ministers in the area). Fifthly, the leaders at this stage manifestly knew the political realities--and that the movement had to be well-organized.

In a November 12, 1970, memo to presbytery chairmen, area chairmen, and key men, Ken Keyes delineated their duties and responsibilities. These included the appointment by presbytery chairmen of area chairmen who were to oversee five to eight churches, and the attendance of these men at presbytery and synod meetings. An all-out effort was to be made to elect conservatives as moderator, stated clerk, chairman of the Committee on the Minister and His Work, and Nominating Committee members at Presbytery. The memo advised, "In presbyteries where liberals control the Nominating Committee, a conservative slate should be prepared and nominated from the floor. If the presbytery rules prevent nominations from the floor, an effort should be made to revise the rules."

Further evidence of Concerned Presbyterians planning is found in a February 24, 1968 memo marked "Urgent!!" and apparently sent to presbytery chairmen regarding commissioners to the 1968 PCUS General Assembly. The chairmen were to fill in a form with the names of commissioners and alternates from their presbytery, along with notation: "C" for conservative, "L" for liberal, "X" for middle-of-the-roader, and "?" for unable to ascertain. A concerted effort was to be made to determine the commissioners' sympathies so the Concerned Presbyterians leadership could know how they would vote on controversial issues.

Concerned Presbyterians launched an all-out effort to defeat enactment of union synods and union presbyteries. Similar to a federated or union church, a union presbytery or union synod was one in which the members of the body came from two or more denominations. Much like the Plan of Union of 1801 with the Congregationalists, members of a union judicatory could participate in the courts of either denomination. This meant that ministers and elders of the Northern Presbyterian Church, who had not taken the same ordination vows as had those in the Southern Presbyterian Church, could be commissioners to the Southern General Assembly. Implementation of union presbyteries and/or union synods was viewed as essential to effect union with the Northern Church, for at least two reasons: (1) there would be an increased number of liberal votes at the Southern Assembly; (2) once these union courts started operating, it would be very difficult to disentangle them. In effect, this was a backdoor method to attain the goal.

Many in the church regarded these provisions to be essentially a violation of the Church's Constitution, especially since the amendments were passed down to the presbyteries under the guise of simply modifying denominational polity. Such an amendment would require only a simple majority of the presbyteries to ratify. The Permanent Judicial Commission of the General Assembly had advised that the change would in effect be a union with another body, which mandated a supermajority of the presbyteries. But the General Assembly itself, controlled by the liberals, ignored that advice, and ruled that a bare majority of the presbyteries would be sufficient.

On the voting of the actual amendments, the efforts of Concerned Presbyterians and other organizations were very effective. The amendment on union synods failed, 38-39; and the amendment on union presbyteries passed 41-36, far closer than anyone had expected. Even then, the proposal would have lost at the presbytery level had it not been for the liberals' politicking. In three presbyteries the court at first voted down the proposed amendment. After "reconsideration," those presbyteries approved the measure.

The issue of union synods and union presbyteries leads us to a couple of observations with regard to liberal churchmen. First, they tend to be dishonest and unscrupulous. This is evident by the determination by the 1968 General Assembly to pretend that this scheme for union judicatories was not in essence organic union with another body, therefore requiring approval by three-fourths of the presbyteries. As a corollary, we would also note that when we lament dishonest politicians in society, we largely should blame the church. The bride of Christ is to be a light to the nations; when the visible church, instead, engages in questionable policies and dishonest practices, it is no wonder that worldly politicians would follow that example. Secondly, it is important to remain for the entire meeting of a church court. Liberals tend to be political critters, and accordingly they are more politically savvy than their conservative counterparts. This is an ongoing problem in both the ecclesiastical realm and the civil realm. It is very difficult for those who are committed to principle, including notions of fair play, to become adept at parliamentary skills which sometimes are important to be employed on the floor of deliberative bodies.

The next year, 1969, the Southern General Assembly declined formally to censure members of Concerned Presbyterians (since that would require judicial process), but it did bear witness against the group. The Assembly said that, in its judgment, "the programs and activities of 'Concerned Presbyterians' do not constitute a valid pattern of Christian faithfulness for our people and the techniques and philosophies of 'Concerned Presbyterians' do not promote the peace, unite, edification and purity of Christ's Church." The Assembly "lovingly and earnestly" entreated "all its constituency to seek more constructive and loving avenues of obedience to Christ and the cause of His Kingdom than those offered by 'Concerned Presbyterians.'" The Stated Clerk of the Assembly was ordered "to send this resolution to every Minister and Clerk of Session with the request that Sessions publicize this action in their congregations."

This bashing by the Assembly did not deter Concerned Presbyterians. A full-page ad in the *Presbyterian Journal* in September boldly declared, "Reasons Why the Liberals Face Certain Defeat." Among the reasons cited was the fact that the organization's membership, "already large," was "increasing rapidly." "These elders are not going to stand idly by and allow a small group of radicals to liquidate the Church. They will have the moral support of tens of thousands of rank-and-file members who have undergirded the Church with their gifts. They will have the voting support of hundreds of faithful ministers who are still preaching the Gospel, who believe in our Presbyterian form of government and who feel that our Church has a distinctive testimony which is worth preserving. We are gaining strength with every passing month."

The next year (1970), Ken Keyes publicly defended his organization in a letter-to-the-editor in the *Presbyterian Journal*, in response to statements made by Dr. William A. Benfield, Moderator of the General Assembly. Dr. Benfield had compared the activities of conservative groups within the church "with the activities of guerrilla groups in our nation today." Keyes wrote that "when churchmen differ radically in their views regarding the integrity and authority of the Bible and the primary mission of the Church, there should be at least mutual respect for those holding opposing views. No Church leader should ever be guilty of heaping abuse upon those who honestly disagree with him."

These expressions are mere tokens of the abuse heaped upon the conservatives who were trying to salvage the PCUS--we could multiply the instances in which lies and slanders were employed by the liberals. This opposition illustrates the nature of the spiritual battle. It is to be understood that when the gospel is under attack, the Chief Adversary (Satan) is ultimately behind those attacks. And he is, we know, the Murderer and Liar from the beginning.

Concerned Presbyterians continued as an organization even after the PCA was formed, in order to fight a rearguard action on behalf of the conservatives who remained in the PCUS. Finally, in 1976, the organization disbanded.

The fourth organization which called for the formation of the PCA was Presbyterian Churchmen United, which was founded by PCUS ministers in 1968.

So, those are the organizations which eventually called for the formation of the Presbyterian Church in America. But the path by which they reached that conclusion and the resolve to enact it was far from automatic, and far from easy.

It was in August 1971 that the announcement was made that there would be a Continuing Presbyterian Church, and that a Steering Committee for a Continuing Presbyterian Church had been formed, consisting of three representatives from each of these four organizations. The conclusion that separation was going to be necessary came about because of the 1971 Southern Presbyterian General Assembly.

At that Assembly, the conservatives had made every effort to get as many conservative commissioners there as possible. But on every key vote, the conservatives were defeated. The disappointment from that outcome is what drove the conservatives to realize that, humanly speaking, reform of the PCUS was impossible.

But there was still hope that a plan of union with the Northern Presbyterian Church might provide a so-called "escape clause" by which congregations which did not want to enter that union could opt out of the denomination, with integrity and with their property intact. The conservatives had been assured that the plan of union being worked on would indeed have such an escape clause in it.

However, in February 1973, the liberal majority representing the PCUS on the committee that was negotiating the merger abruptly decided to scrap that plan. This was because the liberals realized that if the merger went through with that escape clause in it, there would be a significant portion of the Southern churches who would opt out of the merger. The liberals told their conservative counterparts that they could be patient. Privately, some of these men said that the conservatives would "die one way or another--we can wait ten or fifteen years." After all, the seminaries were all in liberal hands, and therefore it would only be a matter of time before the church as a whole would be liberal.

In reaction to this reversal, Jack Williamson said that "we have been negotiating all these months in good faith. Now our people will decide that you have been toying with us as though we were children." Williamson added that in his twenty-five years as a lawyer, he learned to negotiate in good faith. But when he realizes that another lawyer is not negotiating in good faith, he loses confidence in him. "Then it is time to go to court."

William P. Thompson, the Stated Clerk of the United Presbyterian Church, agreed in essence with Williamson. Dr. Thompson said, in front of the press and in front of the Southern liberals on the committee working on the Plan of Union, that they were dishonest. He declared, "[You have] betrayed the brethren who trusted your integrity, and I wouldn't believe you, if I were them, on a stack of Bibles." He added, "I have always believed that politics is the art of the possible. You insisted that an escape clause was necessary in order to secure a favorable vote. You have now

betrayed brethren who trusted your integrity. I now have no further commitment to the escape clause and I now declare that I will never consent to the inclusion of such a clause in a plan of union."

One week later the Steering Committee for a Continuing Presbyterian Church met. That meeting was a sad occasion. One of the participants recalled that much time was spent in prayer, and added, "They were reticent--no one wanted to do it; they were humbled. . . . But God had clearly shown us that's what He wanted us to do, that we had no choice." Others present reflected that many of the men were openly weeping as they prayed.

The decision had been made. A new denomination would become a reality.

However, that decision did not automatically create a new structure. There were numerous details that had to be hammered out, in order to ensure that the new enterprise would be successful and attractive.

The Steering Committee called for a Convocation of Sessions to be held in May 1973 at historic Westminster Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia. (This was the congregation which had been pastored by Peter Marshall, a Scotsman who would in the 1950s become Chaplain of the U.S. Senate.) Fifty-seven churches from twelve states in which the PCUS was located were sent letters asking that they join with the Steering Committee in issuing an invitation to the Convocation. A total of twenty-nine churches did issue the invitation. These churches, scattered in eleven states, engaged in around-the-clock prayer for 48 hours, starting at 1:00 PM the day before the convening of the Convocation.

Notice that this was a convocation of sessions--that is, of church courts, not of individuals. There were 460 voting delegates from 261 churches representing a communicant strength of 70,800. Another 400 observers from 89 churches (all but 13 were PCUS) overflowed the 575-seat auditorium, with many viewing the proceedings on closed-circuit TV.

After an afternoon of programs, two hours were set aside that night for open discussion. Pastor Bill Rose of Selma, Alabama, told the gathering that he had written his first book entitled, *All the Good Reasons for Staying in a Liberal Denomination*. Holding up two large pieces of white cardboard taped together, he opened his book--to reveal nothing but blank pages!

Rev. Jimmy Lyons of Swannanoa, North Carolina, stated that he believed in "subjecting oneself to the brethren," but "a man who gets up on the floor of the Assembly and denies the Gospel is simply not my brother, although he is a prospect." Mr. Lyons noted that the PCUS was no longer willing to discipline such a man. Rev. Donald Dunkerley of Pensacola, Florida, said, "There is no such thing as 'schism' between believers and unbelievers. . . . For me to have stayed in the PCUS any longer would have been sin, because my conscience dictated that I leave. Other people's consciences may not be telling them the same thing."

Rev. William E. Hill, who unknown to others was ill with arthritis and not sure he could speak, gave the keynote address and pointed to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to show that principle, not compromise, pleases God. Mr. Hill said, "If the Word of God commands the preaching of the Gospel, can we afford compromise? Paul said, 'If any come to you preaching another gospel, let him be accursed.'" The founder of Presbyterian Evangelistic Fellowship noted that his father and grandfather and great-grandfather had been Southern Presbyterian ministers, as he declared, "As for myself, I say we must separate."

On the second day of the meeting, Saturday morning, May 19th, the Convocation voted to adopt the *Re-Affirmations of 1973*. These Re-Affirmations listed positions taken by the PCUS side-by-side with historic Presbyterian positions based on Scripture.

"Concerning Holy Scripture," the *Re-Affirmations* stated that although the PCUS had declared allegiance to the "Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the Word of God written," there were some presbyteries which "have not disciplined themselves under the Word of God by requiring their members to accept the scriptures as defined in the Confession of Faith." The document noted: "Indeed, the 1972 General Assembly did reject the plenary and verbal inspiration of Scripture as defined in the Church's Constitution and declined to place its employees under obedience to God's Word."

The Church Reborn would be committed to the historic understanding of the nature of Scripture, including its plenary and verbal inspiration. "Scriptures, being self-attesting, are not subject to the criticism or presuppositions of man, nor may they be interpreted to suit and situations and fancies of man."

Having set forth the foundational doctrine of Scripture, the Re-Affirmations spoke "Concerning Reformed Doctrine." While acknowledging that the Westminster Standards were "still the official doctrinal standards of the PCUS," it was also stated that "some Presbyteries and Sessions have not disciplined themselves to require adherence to these standards." Those participating in the Church Reborn would reaffirm their "ordination obligation to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures." Among the particular doctrines re-affirmed were numerous "cardinal tenets," including the following: the fact that God the Father is the Creator, the historicity of Adam and his being the father of all the human race, the covenant of works made with Adam, his representative headship, the doctrine of original sin, the covenant of grace and the doctrine of election unto everlasting life, the necessity of faith for salvation, the virgin birth of Jesus, His substitutionary atonement, His physical and bodily resurrection and ascension, His return in final judgment, and the work of the Holy Spirit.

"Concerning the Head of the Church," the document averred that the participation by the PCUS in the National Council of Churches involved "staff members and employees of the PCUS taking directions from and being led by alien authorities through or by such Councils of Churches, thus placing over the Constitution of the Church sometimes alien membership." The Church Reborn vowed to "reaffirm our allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ as the sole Head of the Church and the sole Lawgiver in Zion. We should seek fellowship with those Christian bodies in America which believe the Scriptures to be the Word of God written and faithfully adhere to the Reformed tradition and join with us in humble obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ."

"Concerning the Mission of the Church," the document stated that "the Assembly, through its boards, agencies and committees has replaced the Church's mandate to be first of all missionary and evangelistic, with a primary emphasis on social, economic and political mission." The Church Reborn would be committed to the Great Commission and the proclamation of the gospel throughout the world and the nurturing of the elect in the faith."

Other headings included dealing with the Constitution, Education in the Church, the Spirituality of the Church, Ethics, Union Presbyteries, Centralization of Power, Restructure of Synod and Presbyteries, and Property.

Only one person voted "no" on the adoption of this document.

Although the delegates could not bind their churches, they voted 349-16 in favor of a new church. The vote to move toward a new denomination in 1973 was not counted, but only about 20 opposed the motion. After this, the Doxology was sung, followed by unanimous adoption of a statement pledging love to those who in conscience followed a different course of action. Immediately after one of the crucial votes had been taken, the church building was dramatically shaken by a sudden clap of thunder. Was this God's way of showing His displeasure? Or was it perhaps symbolic of the turning of the keys of the kingdom against the Presbyterian Church in the United States? The delegates wondered.

The next major meeting was the Advisory Convention, held in Asheville, North Carolina, August 7-9, 1973. This was in order to advise what would be the First General Assembly of the Continuing Presbyterian Church movement. The overall planning which led up to the formation of a new denomination is one reason why the General Assembly itself went so smoothly--so smoothly, in fact, that a veteran reporter from Washington expressed pleasant surprise for how the General Assembly was conducted. One of the significant motions adopted at the Advisory Convention was when it voted to welcome fellow believers in Christ regardless of race. This was a clear indication that the new church was going to be open and not restrict participation according to ethnicity or the color of one's skin.

The First General Assembly convened on December 4, 1973--112 years to the day from the founding of the Southern Presbyterian Church--at Briarwood Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama. A new denomination had been formed!

The new branch of the church began with 260 congregations and approximately 41,000 communicant members and 55,000 total members. It grew rapidly. For a time, in the 1980s, it was the fastest-growing denomination in the U.S.

The PCA's reception of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod, in 1982--which marked the first reunion between Northern and Southern branches of Presbyterianism--contributed greatly to that growth, and helped the PCA in its quest to expand beyond the Southern United States. At the end of 2013, the PCA boasted 1808 churches and 367,033 total members.

However, there have been serious concerns about the theological direction of the PCA. In the 1990s, a new Concerned Presbyterians group arose, this time from within the PCA, seeking her reformation. There has often been tension between large urban churches which have dominated the denomination and the smaller, often rural, congregations. There have been organizations which have sought to liberalize or at least to thwart reforming trends within the PCA.

On May 10, 2014, the Session of Providence Presbyterian Church, Fayetteville, North Carolina, expressed its concern with a paper, "Five Reasons Why It Might Be Time to Leave the PCA." The five reasons are as follows.

(1) A Failure to Exercise Discipline. This point has to do with the failure to discipline Peter Leithart and Jeffrey Myers, well-known advocates of the Federal Vision. Despite the General Assembly having overwhelmingly condemned the Federal Vision theology on matters such as justification and the sacraments, the respective presbyteries refused to discipline these men, and the General Assembly Standing Judicial Commission declined to overturn the acquittals. The Providence Session noted that "One of the the problems that accelerated the decline of the PCUSA and PCUS, was the creation of "rotten presbyteries" that created safe havens within those denominations for men who believed and taught errors and heresies. Possibly the most famous example of this phenomenon was the way in which New York Presbytery defended Charles Briggs, a pastor who taught Higher Critical theories and attacked the inerrancy of the bible. Despite overwhelming evidence, the presbytery repeatedly declared Briggs to be innocent, and when forced to try him by the denomination, acquitted him on two occasions. Historians agree that the time, energy, and difficulty involved in finally removing Briggs from the pastorate helped to persuade the denomination not to attempt to remove any more heretics from the ministry, and as a result there was little or nothing to stop the leaven of error spreading throughout the denomination. Tragically, the PCA seems to be following exactly the same pattern."

(2) Anarchy in Worship. The failure of the PCA to follow the Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter 21 has led to a lack of uniformity across the denomination: one might find a PCA church whose worship seems positively Episcopalian, another whose worship resembles that of a Charismatic mega-church, another whose worship resembles that of the "Emergent Churches" and even a few that follow the Puritan RPW model. This creates huge problems when members of the PCA move and suddenly find that none of the PCA churches in their area have worship services that look remotely like the PCA worship to which they had become accustomed. In our case many PCA transplants who move to our city end up worshipping in charismatic churches instead of the two PCA churches in town because their former PCA churches had a charismatic worship style."

(3) A Failure to Safeguard the Sacraments. Mentioned here were two issues: the practice of intinction that is occurring across the PCA, and the fact that not only belief in paedocommunion but also its practice are spreading.

(4) A Failure to Maintain the Teaching of Scripture Regarding Six-Day Creation. Here, note was made that theistic evolution is being promoted through an organization called BioLogos, whose conference have been held at the prominent Redeemer Presbyterian Church in new York City.

(5) A Failure to Stand against Moral Compromise. This point focused on the fact that the PCA's Reformed University Fellowship complied with the demand of Vanderbilt University that anyone, regardless of that person's beliefs or sexual orientation, would be allowed to serve in the organization's student leadership. The Providence Session declared, " While disappointing, this decision shouldn't surprise us, compromise has become the PCA's preferred response to any controversy within the church (which is how we ended up with four acceptable positions on Creation instead of one), and we have been compromising for so long that it is now part of the character of our denomination. It seems clear that when it comes to the inevitable legal conflict between homosexual activism and the evangelical church, that the PCA's preferred methodology will be to seek a compromise while claiming that we are doing so that we might not lose an opportunity to preach the gospel in the public square. Indeed, it is hard for us to imagine any issue over which the PCA would be willing to take a stand that might cause us to be called nasty

things by the media. We do not seem to be willing to be tied to the stake and burned for anything related to the faith. Simply put, the PCA does not appear to have sufficient backbone to stand against the storm of persecution that will be blowing against the church in the 21st Century."

That, of course, is the opinion of one church session, and there are numerous church sessions and presbyteries and churchmen who would be fully enthusiastic about the direction of the PCA and its prospect for long-term success.

In my final chapter on the history of the PCA, which was published in 1999, I write the following:

At the end of the twentieth century, the church was living in an incredibly irrational world, and one could argue that this irrationality may very well be one form of God's punishment for religious, theological, and moral apostasy in the nation. God does sometimes send people a strong delusion that they should believe a lie (II Thessalonians 2). This irrationalism has many manifestations, including a diminution of the skills of critical thinking. Another manifestation was the unwillingness to draw definitive conclusions from Biblical data--especially if someone might be offended.

Evangelical feminism had made inroads to the church as a whole, and the PCA was not exempt from the incursion. The feminization of Protestantism, which began in the nineteenth century, continued. When founded in 1973, the PCA represented a resistance to an effeminate Christianity. As cultural values have changed, taking difficult stances may prove to be problematic, especially if in doing so offense might be given. An eleventh commandment--"Thou shalt be nice"--has caused indecisiveness to replace godly resolve. While searching for what she is for, will the PCA recall that she is also against some things?

Presbyterians who separated from mainline churches were regarded as "fundamentalists." Many in the PCA today, wanting to shed that label, prefer a neo-evangelical approach--an approach which promotes accommodation. Whether an accommodationist perspective will be sufficient to maintain the current traditionalist commitment to Scriptural truth is an open question.

Historians have noted that there was a tri-partite division within the Northern Presbyterian Church in the 1920s and 1930s, among liberals, evangelicals, and traditionalists. What caused the left-wing eventually to triumph was the fact that the evangelicals wanted peace at any cost, and also wanted to avoid controversy in order to continue preaching the gospel and ministering the Word. The traditionalists, who were doctrinally self-conscious, contended that purity must come before peace, and must form the basis for unity. For the sake of "peace," the evangelicals helped drive out the "contentious" traditionalists, thereby paving the way for the ultimate liberal victory.

As suggested previously, the same type of three-fold division obtained in the Southern Presbyterian Church. The difference is that in the Southern experience, the conservatives voluntarily withdrew, while in the North, the conservatives were forcibly removed through the use of judicial sanctions.

Although the spectrum of thought is not nearly as broad in the PCA as it was in the old denominations, it is apparent that the same dynamics are at work today in the PCA. An avante garde left, willing to experiment with worship and polity, battles conservative traditionalists, while the bulk of the church is in the middle.

But will the spectrum's band-width expand? While there may be little outright liberalism in the PCA in 1999 with respect to basic issues, there is always the potential for its manifestation. This is especially the case with regard to a fundamental issue such as the nature and authority of Scripture. Fancy schemes promulgated by seminary professors in ivory towers may help to create a craving for esoteric knowledge, discernible only to the ones "in the know." On a related front, the embrace of what the nineteenth century Southern Presbyterian theologians would refer to as "sensualistic" worship correspondingly has already had a detrimental effect on the ability of people to comprehend abstract ideas. The practical result from these phenomena is the loss of Biblical knowledge by the laity, creating fertile territory for heterodoxy.

Another foundational matter is that of the gospel itself. How widespread of an understanding has there been of consistent Calvinism?

In the current ecclesiastical battles within the PCA, it appears that even fundamental issues, such as the nature of truth and justice and righteousness, are not agreed upon. If that is the case, is it not possible that there is not agreement on the gospel itself? Traditional Protestantism posits that at the heart of the good news lies a *transaction*--the pronouncement of "not guilty" upon sinners who have been justified by a holy and righteous God. This means that salvation is rooted in a legal declaration. It is something which is totally objective, in that the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ forms the basis for one's justification.

Consistent Calvinism maintains this high, and objective, standard. Others in the PCA, while not formally denying justification by faith alone based on imputation, apparently place a higher premium on one's *relationship* with God. Mirroring their view of the gospel, what is important to these churchmen is relationships. The type of theological precision and attention to detail which is important to the more "conservative" members of the PCA, dims in significance, and can even become an irritant.

The clash is between those motivated by principle and those motivated by pragmatic considerations. It is not that the more pragmatically-minded folk are not principled. However, their principle is pragmatically-oriented, and therefore anthropocentric by definition; while their counterparts are more theocentric. The result is that the one side has a subjectivistic approach--whether to salvation or matters of ecclesiology (such as doctrine, polity, and worship)--while the other is more concerned with objective reality. Or, one could say that there are "experientialists" and "judicialists", who have radically different perspectives. Although they share much theology in common, they structure their thoughts in diverse ways, so that there are in effect two different systems.

In days gone by, this type of difference in approach signaled significant consequences. In the Northern and Southern Presbyterian Churches, the priority which many of the evangelicals placed on evangelism and church growth over theological precision led to the eventual capture of the denomination by the liberals. Indeed, the lack of theological precision led to liberalism's man-centered religion, via a modified gospel--a generically "evangelical" version rather than the "Reformed" variety. Assuming that there is meaning to history and that it can teach valuable lessons, is there any reason to doubt that this pattern may hold true for the PCA as well?

But the hope for institutional survival may be as simple as a sincere resolve to follow the denomination's Constitutional Standards, particularly the Confession of Faith and Catechisms. A society's constitution forms the basis for living within that society; a society's refusal to enforce its own rules and standards leads to chaos and, ultimately, death. The situation is even more serious when that society is a body of believers. When a church's documents do not genuinely reflect its witness and the reality of its walk, that church has manifested hypocrisy and has compromised its testimony. Repentance (change of mind), including endeavor after new obedience, is the way to revival.

The Presbyterian Church in America has come into existence by God's gracious plan. How long she survives as a visible manifestation of the Body of Christ will depend on how much she remains in line with her motto:

"True to Scripture, the Reformed Faith, and Obedient to the Great Commission of Jesus Christ."