

We are Presbyterians. We believe that our system of doctrine is in accordance with the Scriptures. We do not believe in independency. We believe that the Lord established His church and that we should do all we can to help build it. . . . My feeling of urgency has come back to me. Our Synod is pitifully small—the numbers of the unsaved terribly large. Time is running out on our movement if it is to be an arm to be used by our Lord in His command to spread the gospel to all people. We must have missionaries, we must have churches to support them; we must have trained ministers to build and feed the churches and trained missionaries to go to the mission fields to tell the wonders of God's love, the lost condition of men, and salvation by grace alone.

Presley Edwards
(*BNS*, April 9, 1957)

The Necessity for Consistent Christianity

AT last our story is told—at least for the present and it is incumbent upon each one of us to react to the history that has passed before our eyes, to register some response to the historical reality with which we have been confronted. For respond we must in one way or another. Some no doubt will respond with passive indifference, but God forbid that such should be the case with those of us associated with the Church. May we all respond in the spirit of active participation in this history not only in its movement through the past but also in its march through the present and into the future.

Each one of us will, of course, react in his own way, and responses will vary in nature and content from one individual to another. This concluding chapter embodies, in a somewhat personal way, some of the author's own response to the history behind the RPCES with a view to provoking others to respond with more reflection and passion than would otherwise be the case. As such, the chapter is in no way an attempt to deal with all the many questions raised by this history. Nor is it in any way an attempt to set forth hard and last historical conclusions formulated by the steeled objectivity of the professional historian. It is simply an attempt to prime the mental pumps of those associated with, or interested in, the Church.

By this point it will have become obvious to the careful reader that the foregoing historical account revolves in a gen-

eral way around the three fundamental principles of Presbyterianism outlined in Chapter 1; they are the analytical pegs on which the whole history is hung. Thus it is only natural and fitting that this concluding chapter should also revolve around the three basic principles of consistent Christianity. It is for the most part an appeal for renewed allegiance to that noble Presbyterian vision of consistent Christianity.

A Noble Vision

As we look back over this history, we are struck with one overwhelming impression: whatever high ideals Presbyterians may have, their performance judged in the light of those ideals is often a sad story. Their vision is one thing, their record another. In view of this impression, we may be tempted to doubt the validity of the Presbyterian vision itself. Without a doubt those unsympathetic to that vision would point to this history as proof that the Presbyterian ideal is either mistaken and thus from the nature of the case incapable of fulfillment, or incapable of fulfillment and thus manifestly mistaken.

Now in response to this temptation, just expressed in grossly oversimplified terms, we may fortify out selves with many considerations, three of which immediately come to mind.

First, we may be prepared to admit to much failure in Presbyterian history even on the part of those who have held the vision of consistent Christianity ever before them. Who among us to whom that vision is incalculably dear is not humiliated by the facts of Presbyterian history? However, we must always distinguish between the vision itself on the one hand and those who have tried to implement it on the other. We must ever bear in mind what the old Reformed Presbyterians knew only too well: 'No system, however perfect, can be perfectly administered by frail man.'¹

1. *Reformation Principles Exhibited (RPE)*, 1892 (6th ed.), 48.

Second, we must consider the question as to the validity of the Presbyterian vision in the light of its ecclesiastical alternatives as they are historically manifested to us both in theory and in practice. We need not enumerate them here; we all know what they are. We may profitably compare them to historic Presbyterianism, and we may well ask ourselves whether, all things considered, they fare any better in view of the Biblical and historical data. In the searching light of Scripture do any of these ecclesiastical outlooks compare with the balance and depth of the Presbyterian vision? Then, in the blistering light of history, do their historical embodiments display a better showing than the Presbyterians?

Third, the question as to whether the Presbyterian vision is on the whole a true representation of consistent Christianity can never in the final analysis be decided by the ups and downs of church history, but only by the touchstone of divine revelation. Indeed, the final and ultimately the only valid criterion of the validity of the Presbyterian vision is the inscripturated Word of God. Is the Presbyterian vision of consistent Christianity the Biblical vision? Is it truly consistent Christianity, or not? Ultimately, that is the only question.

However, even those of us who are convinced that historic Presbyterianism best approximates the Biblical pattern may be tempted to react to this history in a negative frame of mind. On the one hand, we may be prone to fall into that very critical frame of mind which has so evidently left its scars upon this history. On the other hand, we may be prone to fall into a discouraged slate of mind as we review the past failures of Presbyterians.

In the lace of such temptations, we would plead for a healthier response in terms of a positive state of mind, arguing that a negative sort of response would be a very shallow one indeed. Of course, there is much to be criticized and much to discourage in this history, but far more important are the lessons to be learned by the failures of others and the

encouragement to be derived from the lives of those who have gone before. Sympathetic understanding should take the place of unsympathetic criticism, and we should be encouraged by church history rather than discouraged by it.

With regard to the matter of criticism, we must distinguish between unsympathetic criticism and sympathetic criticism. We are all so prone to the former just like so many in the history before us, but what havoc this infernal criticism has wrought in the Church! There are, of course, always things and people which can and should be criticized, and we must exercise our critical judgment if we are to be faithful to the Lord, but how much more profitable our criticism is if it is rooted in a sympathetic attempt to understand the people and things we criticize. We should make every attempt to understand first, and only then criticize. However, like the proverbial gunman, we so often shoot first and ask questions later.

If we apply this principle of sympathetic understanding to the history behind the RPCES, how much more fruitful is our study? It is easy for us to look back from our vantage point and criticize the performance of those who have gone before, but had we been in their shoes, would our performance have been any better? How much more profitable it is for us to endeavor to enter into their frame of mind with a view to understanding how they thought and why they acted as they did. For instance, in working through the materials upon which this history is based, the present writer has sojourned with *all* the characters who have put in their appearance on its stage, the so-called heroes and villains alike. Indeed, without a conscious effort so to do, not only is it impossible to write history but to learn from it. With this end in view, we have made a special effort to understand sympathetically each side of the numerous controversies which have from time to time dominated the scene. For this reason, we can be much less critical of the various participants in them than would otherwise be the case. As an example, while

we are more convinced than ever of the tragic weaknesses of Carl McIntire's person and position, we may have much more sympathy with his strong points and his vision than was once the case. All of us, whatever we may think of Carl McIntire and a host of other characters in this history, can learn a great deal from him and them; whereas if we only see history as a tragic comedy of errors, we condemn ourselves to ignorance of what can be learned from it.

This leads us to say that, with regard to the matter of encouragement, we have been encouraged rather than discouraged by what has gone before. There are of course many discouraging developments in this history, but we have been encouraged to persevere in the attempt to realize the Presbyterian vision, not only because it nobly represents the consistent Christianity of the Scriptures, but because of the heroic efforts of those who have tried to implement it in the past. We may be prone to see their failures in their attempt to implement the Presbyterian vision, but all failures notwithstanding, at least they tried! That is more than can be said of others with a lesser vision. The noble vision stands out all the more nobly against the background of the endeavors of frail flesh to realize it.

Furthermore, we may profitably inquire whether, despite many sad developments, these endeavors can be summed up in terms of failure. The present writer is convinced that such a summary judgment would be a very shallow one indeed.

In the first place, the criterion of such a judgment, namely the Presbyterian vision itself, is in virtue of its being the divine standard immeasurably high. Tested by this yardstick, all endeavors to measure up to it on the part of redeemed sinners would appear to fall far short of the mark. Indeed, given the remnants of sin in individual Presbyterians and the sin-cursed world in which they have tried to implement the vision of consistent Christianity, it is a wonder that anything has been accomplished at all.

In the second place, we must realize that a very great deal

has been accomplished by the Presbyterians who have been represented in these pages. It must be borne in mind that, due to the distinctive purpose of this book, much of this accomplishment has not been recounted in these pages. In elucidating the history behind the RPCES, it has been necessary to lay the heaviest emphasis upon the organizational aspect of the ecclesiastical history involved with all its attendant controversies and divisions, but it must be remembered that this is only a small part of the story. Many of the very significant but less dramatic and, sad to say, less interesting aspects of the story have not been given adequate treatment in these pages. For instance, the story of how the Lord has used the Presbyterian Church as a channel through which to pour forth His grace upon many has scarcely been told; and the incalculable effect for good which the Church has had upon the institutions and individuals of society at large has scarcely been touched upon. In this connection, it must always be kept in mind that organizational harmony in the Church of God is but one aspect of the Presbyterian vision.

In the third place, much organizational harmony has been achieved in view of the many important issues with which Presbyterians have had to deal. Moreover, the very controversies and divisions themselves reveal a vitality and concern for the purity of the testimony of the visible church absent in quarters where a less exalted vision of the church obtains. Finally, there is a sense in which the Presbyterian vision of the church and consistent Christianity, by virtue of its own exalted content, will never be fully realized on earth.

At this juncture we must face the fact that the problems which have beset the Presbyterian Church in America have been due in no small measure to somewhat different conceptions of the Presbyterian vision itself. Alas, there are somewhat variant versions of consistent Christianity within the fold of historic Presbyterianism; and as this history amply demonstrates, from time to time these variant versions find themselves incompatible in the same church organization

only to go their separate ways. Each side in the dispute has a somewhat different version of what the Presbyterian Church should be. Indeed, it is a curious fact, how in these controversies the same issues, though dressed in the garb of somewhat different historical circumstances, reappear again and again. It is therefore not surprising that these issues revolve in some way around the three theoretical principles of historic Presbyterianism.

Let us take another brief look at these principles in the light of our story.

Bible Presbyterianism

The *formal* principle of consistent Christianity has to do with its principle of authority whereby the only infallible mediator of God's authority to men is the Bible. On the one hand, this principle renders every aspect of men's lives directly answerable to divine authority in Scripture; on the other hand, by reserving infallibility to Scripture alone, it frees men from the tyranny of any absolutized human authority. While on the one hand, no man can usurp the authority of God, no man can escape it on the other by trifling with the infallible authority of the Bible.

Now in the history that has passed before us we can distinguish between those who have *tried* to take this principle of Biblical authority seriously and those who have not. This was certainly the chief issue in the modernist controversy. Previous to it all Presbyterian Churches in America would fall into the former category. Afterwards with the larger Presbyterian denominations, in particular the U.S.A. Presbyterian Church, having fallen away from historic Presbyterianism into the latter category, it is only the smaller Presbyterian bodies like the RPCES which *try* to take seriously the principle of Biblical authority.

Whether the RPCES does in fact take seriously certain aspects of the content of the Bible is another question, one of which we must always be aware, but at least we are aware

that, in view of our formal principle, we are bound to take seriously the whole counsel of God found in Holy Writ. At least we have heretofore maintained our formal principle without compromise. This stance must by all means and at all costs be maintained. We must be the firm exponents of Bible Presbyterianism in this sense. We must be willing to be a Bible-believing people in the sense that it is our only infallible rule in faith and practice, and if as Presbyterians we cannot defend our beliefs and actions on Biblical grounds, we had better give them up. Moreover, whatever differences may arise among us as to the content of what God does in fact teach in the Bible, let us be clear in our allegiance to our formal principle by resting our case on the careful exegesis and application of Scripture. Whatever differences may arise with others, who share this principle and cleave to the Christ of the Bible, as to what the Bible teaches, let us cherish the common ground between us. Let us rejoice in the common ground we have with all who stand both under and upon the infallible Book.

Why make so much of this formal principle? Why hold on so dearly to the infallibility and inerrancy of the Bible alone? Why be the militant exponents of Bible Presbyterianism in this sense? The immediate answer to this question is very straightforward. Simply because it is the historic position of the true Church of the New Covenant being in accord with the witness of the Lord himself and the New Testament writings.² This is reason enough for refusing to be moved on this

2. That the Lord Jesus Christ and the New Testament authors do in fact teach, both by precept and example, the divine authority and thus inerrancy of what is for them Scripture (*i.e.*, the Old Testament) is obvious to the careful student. That such is the case, *i.e.*, that Scripture is in principle an infallible authority for the Church of the New Covenant, has often been successfully argued with much exegetical acumen. But that the New Testament writings taken as a whole teach that Scripture is in principle the *only* infallible authority for the New Covenant Church is more often assumed than argued on exegetical grounds. I have tried to do so in some detail in a little unpublished work entitled *The New Testament Doctrine of Scripture* (M.A. Thesis, Columbia Bible College), 1962, 95-124. The argument is too involved, and the evidence too meticulous, to be

or any other such issue. Moreover, we may be permitted to advance certain additional considerations.

The first consideration is the fact that this formal principle of consistent Christianity protects its material principle, namely the Gospel. This principle of authority protects the basic content of the Christian faith—first and foremost, for example, the authority of God the Creator and Redeemer as set forth in Biblical and traditional theism. Those who dispense with the absolute authority of the Bible soon dispense with the absolute authority of the God of the Bible; and those who can dispense with this formal principle soon find that they can dispense with any number of other precious doctrines of the faith while at the same time adding other necessary doctrines which are either not in the Bible or contrary to what is in the Bible.

The second consideration is the fact that we have before us today three clear-cut examples of what happens once this indispensable principle of authority is undermined or abandoned. Out one window we see *cultism* — by which is meant the many patently anti-Christian sects which in the name of Christianity have sprung up, without any institutional connection with the historic Christian Church, from the so-called Christian soil of the land. Out another we see *Romanism*, concealing behind its monolithic facade many of the pagan and anti-Christian elements of both ancient and modern culture. Out a third we see *modernism* blatantly exemplified in that ecclesiastical monstrosity known as the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. We have seen what a once great Church can become once one is allowed to gainsay the formal principle of consistent Christianity in her ranks. Given this classic exhibit, so graciously displayed to us in the providence of God, we should be doubly guilty if we permit this precious principle to go by the board. In this connection, while it is just as foolish for us to expend too much time and energy

reproduced here. In brief, its validity hinges on the analogy between the Old and New Covenant dispensations, or administrations, of the Covenant of Grace.

Hutchinson, The History Behind the RPC,ES (1974), pp. 408-435.

combating modernism, as it was for our spiritual forefathers combating Romanism, the controversy with modernism must not be abated any more than that with Romanism.

The third consideration is the fact that the doctrine of Biblical inerrancy is being challenged today from within the ranks of evangelical Christianity so-called. Some in the U.S.A. Presbyterian tradition are denying that historic Presbyterianism includes the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture;³ others in the so-called neo-evangelical camp are questioning the truthfulness of the doctrine; while still others in those Reformed circles so-called which have been influenced by the Amsterdam Philosophy are questioning its utility. All of these voices are clamoring for the authority of an errant Bible, for the authority but not the inerrancy of the Word of God. As if anything less than truth could ever command the consciences of honest men! As if the authority and veracity of the Bible could ever be honestly, legitimately, or meaningfully separated! As if anything could be meaningfully designated the Word of God and not be true! Most of the issues raised in the present controversy were thoroughly discussed in the debate in the U.S.A. Presbyterian Church at the turn of the century. Most of the caricatures of, and difficulties with, the historic Presbyterian, indeed Christian, doctrine of Scripture have been adequately dealt with by the apologists of the past. In view of this rich heritage it would be well for us to familiarize ourselves with that debate, fortify ourselves with the arguments of those apologists and any new ones the Lord brings to mind, and take our stand upon the infallible Word of God.

At this point we must mention a very conspicuous fact of this history, namely that there are within the framework of historic Presbyterianism differing traditions regarding the nature and application of Biblical authority to the various issues which from time to time confront the Church of Jesus

3. *E.g.*, J. B. Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession*, 1966.

Christ. On the one hand, we have roughly the Old Side, Old School, and Orthodox Presbyterian tradition; on the other, the New Side, New School, and Bible Presbyterian tradition. The Reformed Presbyterian tradition has strong affinities with both of these traditions, depending upon the particular type of issue in question. If, for instance, we take ethical or moral (including social and political) questions, the Reformed Presbyterian tradition is more in line with the New School and Bible Presbyterian outlook. If we take doctrinal or ecclesiastical questions, it is more in line with the Old School and Orthodox Presbyterian outlook. The former outlook is prone to prescribe a stricter moral code on the ground of the comprehensive application of Biblical principles, whereas the latter outlook is prone to prescribe a stricter doctrinal and ecclesiastical code on the basis of such application. While the former is prone to prescribe more detailed answers to specific moral questions not explicitly dealt with in the Scripture, the latter is prone to prescribe more detailed answers to doctrinal and ecclesiastical questions of a similar nature.

Now this is not the place to discuss the theoretical and practical issues arising out of the tension between these two historical traditions, both of which have their strengths and weaknesses, but in view of the present situation of the RPCES, certain comments may be fruitful.

From an historical standpoint we should realize that this tension is in a sense in the New Testament itself. Given the background of Phariseeism, the early Christians rejoiced in their liberty from the bondage of believing that their standing before God was determined by their adherence to the detailed traditions of men accumulated through the attempt, sometimes mistaken, to apply the law of God to particular circumstances. At the same time, they adhered to a very strict ethical code because of their fear of God and respect for His authority embodied in the law of Christ which they believed was to be rigorously applied to every area of life.

This same tension is also manifest in the Protestant Reformation. For instance, the Puritans and Presbyterians, given the background of Romanism, rejoiced in their Christian liberty, their freedom from the tyranny of Romish traditionalism. At the same time, they were deathly afraid of libertine antinomianism, and thus were zealous to find in the whole counsel of God embodied in Scripture an authoritative answer to every question. This tension between the freeing and binding functions of the Word of God, between liberty and authority, is very apparent in the Westminster Standards which try to strike a happy balance between them.⁴

In the light of these considerations, the formal principle of consistent Christianity must mean to us blessed freedom from those traditions of men which are either contrary to, or have no basis in the Word of God. We want no return to Romanism, and we must ever be on our guard against Phariseism. At the same time, the principle of Biblical authority must mean blessed bondage to the law of Christ as it pertains to every area of thought and life in the contemporary world. We must not be content with the historical exegesis of Scripture alone. We must labor to apply Biblical principles to contemporary life, ever mindful that our applications as such must never be identified with the Word of God itself. We must strive to bring every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ, always aware that only insofar as our applications are valid do they partake of divine authority, and we must be careful to shun any notion of Christian liberty which either gives the impression that God's authority is irrelevant to some areas of human experience, or fails to respect the consciences of others.

So much for the formal principle of Presbyterianism; we now turn to its material principle.

4. Cf. e.g., WCF I, vi; XIX, v; XX, ii-iv, *et al.*

Calvinistic Evangelicalism

The *material* principle of consistent Christianity has to do with its confession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, the incarnate Gospel of God. Indeed, our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ is the heart of the Gospel in that all of Christian doctrine is centered in Him. Thus the heart of consistent Christianity is a Christ-centered Evangelicalism.

It is for this reason that the heart of the Presbyterian Confession of Faith is the Gospel of Christ set forth in all the fullness of the historic Calvinistic interpretation of it. The Westminster Confession sets forth a Calvinistic Evangelicalism centered in the Christ of God. For if Calvinism is God-grounded, it is also Christ-centered. Certainly the heart of the Confession is its Calvinism, or distinctively Reformed theology. For the Catholic aspect of the Confession is presented as the presupposition of its distinctly Calvinistic aspect, and its Covenant theology is the natural outgrowth of its Calvinistic theology.

Now the history of Presbyterianism in America displays the Church's constant battle to maintain its Calvinistic confession of faith, an incessant struggle on four fronts to uphold a genuinely Calvinistic Evangelicalism. This issue reappears again and again throughout this history. On the first front the enemy is *modernism*, whether dressed up in eighteenth, nineteenth, or twentieth century garb. On the second front, the enemy is *Arminianism* often half-concealed in the garments of a supposedly Calvinistic fundamentalism. On the third front, the enemy is that unevangelical *hyper-Calvinism* (for want of a better term) which is centered in itself rather than in the Christ of the Gospel. Finally, on the fourth front is modern *dispensationalism*, that strange illegitimate offspring of true Calvinism.

In view of this historic struggle and the fact that these enemies still abound in the contemporary situation, we must endeavor to maintain our Calvinistic confession of faith. It is

incumbent upon us to uphold a Calvinistic Evangelicalism at all costs. We must by all means uphold the absolute sovereignty of God, *both* in its indicative and imperative senses as revealed in the Bible and in the Gospel of Christ. God's sovereignty in redemption and salvation as well as in creation and providence must never be watered down; Calvinistic particularism must be maintained without compromise. While the Gospel of Christ must be proclaimed indiscriminately to all men, it must be the Gospel of particular redemption, the Gospel of the saving grace of God—there being no other Gospel worthy of the name—with a view to gathering Christian families into the Israel of God. Also, this Gospel of grace must never be proclaimed in such a way as to tone down the validity of the law of God in the New Covenant or the basic continuity of the Church of the New Covenant with that of the Old.

This Gospel must be proclaimed, first of all, in the teeth of the modernistic denial of it. *Modernism* attacks the formal authority of the Bible because it cannot abide its evangelical content. Of all the historic brands of Christianity, it is Calvinism, or consistent Christianity, which ecumenical modernism in its servitude to modern thought hates most because it fears it most. For modernism knows that of its adversaries Calvinism alone is able to stand up to modern thought, challenge it at its roots, and maintain a consistent position against it. It is to be regretted that in its past battles with modernism Presbyterians have often failed to exploit the riches of their Calvinistic position. It is incumbent upon us in the contemporary situation, while not neglecting the riches of the older apologetic, to learn from this failure. We must exhibit a mighty Calvinistic Evangelicalism in stark contrast to modernistic humanism, or rather pseudo-humanism, that old pagan message which, being devoid of any good news, is no gospel at all.

The true Gospel must also be proclaimed in contrast to that *Arminianism* often present, consciously or unconsciously-

ly, in Fundamentalist circles; the full Gospel in contrast to a watered-down ecumenical fundamentalism. This is especially important in our day when the theological weaknesses of this kind of fundamentalism of an Arminian variety lack the theological stronghold, artillery, and backbone necessary in the theological life and death struggle with modernism. For Calvinism has been, and will continue to be, the intellectual backbone of fundamentalism. It is no accident that most of the contributors to *The Fundamentals* were Presbyterians, or that fundamentalism's foremost champion in the modernist controversy of the 1920's was a Presbyterian. Fundamentalism will always, as it has in the past, look to Calvinism for leadership.

It is for this reason that the fundamentalist, while sometimes less Calvinistic than he thinks, is more often, when the chips are down, a true Calvinist—although often ignorant of the line points of Reformed theology. Often he has been educated to see the Bible through Arminian glasses and clichés, but upon sober reflection is a Calvinist at heart. While not having thought out in any clear-cut way the theological implications of his inmost Christian consciousness, he truly believes in the absolute sovereignty of God, particular redemption, and the perseverance of the saints in the Christian life of the Church—when these doctrines are patiently and plainly presented in an accurate, balanced, and warmly evangelical spirit.

It is right at this point that Calvinistic Evangelicalism has its greatest opportunity in its historic struggle with Arminian fundamentalism. It is also right at this point that the adherents of the Reformed faith have often bungled that opportunity and missed the boat. The historic struggle has often been hampered by what we may call a Reformed mysticism. This is that attitude of condescending impatience with all who cannot immediately see the validity and grandeur of that distinctively Reformed faith which is the exclusive property of all the initiated elect. Rather than patiently and humbly

explaining the basic features of historic Reformed theology on the basis of, and by means of, the Bible, this attitude is content with the impatient and pompous spouting of the Confession of Faith. Rather than basing the case for the Reformed faith on careful exegetical arguments, the appeal is to permit oneself to be initiated into the mystical circle of the Reformed—in which that historic and noble term becomes a shibboleth to move unchallenged within the inner circle of the elect. Once this step is taken all somehow suddenly becomes light, and one finds that he is really Reformed. The word then tends to become a password to cover, indeed justify, all sorts of antifundamentalist sentiments, some of which have little to do with historic Reformed theology. The initiate then tends to become centered in his own conception of what the Reformed faith is, rather than in the Christ of the Gospel. He tends to see his Christian responsibility almost entirely in terms of reforming the unreformed rather than in terms of reaching the lost. Needless to say, this attitude is a hindrance rather than a help in the struggle with Arminian fundamentalism. Would it not be better to be unconsciously Reformed in one's thinking simply by virtue of being Biblical, than self-consciously Reformed in one's thinking simply by virtue of being—'Reformed'?

This historic struggle is also often hampered by an inability to communicate Calvinistic distinctives in a plain manner. So often Calvinistic doctrine is presented in such a muddled way that it tends to confuse rather than enlighten. It tends to raise more questions in the interpretation of the Bible than it answers, to present more problems than it solves. Take for example the question as to whether man has free will. In answer to this question, the so-called Calvinist, perhaps a seminary graduate, will glibly assert that man does not in fact have free will, when there is a chapter in the Westminster Confession entitled 'Of Free-Will' which asserts that man does in fact have free will.⁵ Of course, the answer to the

5. WCF IX, i; cf. III, i.

question depends on what one means by free will, but often nobody bothers to define the sense in which the term is meant. Thus while Calvinism teaches that according to Scripture man has free will in some senses but not in others, the typical fundamentalist has the misguided impression that Calvinism simply denies that man has free will. Is not our Arminian flesh enough of a hindrance to our Calvinistic testimony without undermining it with this sort of carelessness?

Thus another hindrance in maintaining a Calvinistic as opposed to a semi-Arminian Evangelicalism is that inaccurate, unbalanced, and unevangelical presentation of so-called Calvinistic doctrine which goes by the name of hyper-Calvinism. Indeed, *hyper-Calvinism*, along with modernism and Arminianism, is another of the historic adversaries of Calvinistic Evangelicalism. In fact, one could argue that the rise of historic Arminianism is to be traced to hyper-Calvinistic tendencies in the Reformed Churches. Whether such hyper-Calvinistic tendencies give rise to Arminian tendencies, or vice versa, is one of those historical chicken and egg problems. At any rate, when we find the one we are likely to find the other. By hyper-Calvinism is meant any presentation of distinctively Calvinistic doctrine which seriously distorts the whole counsel of God, especially by precluding in theory or in practice, the universal offer of the Gospel and fervent evangelistic activity.

Now this matter of the whole counsel of God is a tricky one, one on which it is easy, especially for Presbyterians, to get hung up. It is easy for those who stress the necessity of the whole counsel of God to fall into the trap of distorting the content of that counsel while placing a strong formal emphasis upon it. The trap works something like this. Someone concludes that the problem with the Church is that the whole counsel of God is being neglected in that certain pet doctrines are either neglected or not receiving their due emphasis. For instance, Calvinistic distinctives are being neglected or underemphasized; they are therefore stressed out

of all proportion to, and to the neglect of much of the Word of God—as if Calvinistic distinctives are the whole counsel of God, which is simply not the case. The result is that the doctrine propounded is virtually hyper-Calvinism. The justification for this is the assertion that one must virtually preach hyper-Calvinism in order to bring the Calvinistic testimony of the Church up to what it should be. However, this attitude is both pernicious, in that two wrongs never made a right, and stupid, in that it defeats its own express purpose. It is like the so-called civil rights enthusiasts advocating discrimination in reverse, which is the worst possible solution to the race problem.

It is a fact of church history that Calvinists can be fervently evangelistic in practice. It is also a fact of history that they can be coldly unevangelical in practice. Indeed, the Calvinistic theology of the Bible, with its great stress on the sovereignty of God in both its indicative and imperative aspects, is a mighty incentive to true evangelism. There is nothing in true Calvinism which precludes fervent evangelistic endeavor, but where this is lacking in so-called Calvinistic circles, hyper-Calvinistic indifference is likely lurking in the shadows. This is likely to involve either a warped view of Calvinistic particularism on the one hand, or of the Cultural Mandate on the other. Indeed, some misguided souls see the Great Commission of Matthew as simply a renewal of the Cultural Mandate of Genesis—as if mankind had never fallen into sin!

Finally, the historic struggle to maintain Calvinistic Evangelicalism has had to face the menace of modern *dispensationalism* with its erroneous views on the history of redemption, the relationship between law and Gospel, and the doctrine of the church. This particular aspect of the battle must not be relaxed. In this connection, we may inquire how this struggle has been hampered in the past lest we repeat the same mistakes in the present and future.

First, much of the strategy of the past has been to demonstrate that modern dispensationalism is incompatible with historic Presbyterianism, that one cannot hold to Reformed

theology and ‘dispensational truth’ at one and the same time. Now this is not hard to demonstrate, but it accomplishes very little. For spouting the Westminster Standards is no substitute for the painstaking refutation of dispensationalism on exegetical grounds. The crying need of the hour is a meticulous demonstration that the dispensationalist’s interpretation of the Bible is erroneous, that the Bible is the enemy, rather than the friend, of his distinctive views.

Second, there has been among Presbyterians a certain bitter antidispensationalism. However unhealthy this may be, it is no doubt explained by the anomaly of there being many dispensationalists in the professing Presbyterian Church on the one hand, and by the misguided enthusiasm of a few converts from dispensationalism on the other, but bitter antidispensationalism must give way to that more excellent way, the law of love.

This leads, third, to the observation that perhaps the greatest hindrance in the struggle with dispensationalism has been, curiously enough, the neglect of Covenant theology. How is this the case? Well, it would seem that many of those who have professed to believe in Covenant theology have not practiced it. How else can one explain the amazing fact that practically whole generations of American Presbyterians have not only been ignorant of Covenant theology but brainwashed with dispensationalism—if it is not to be explained by the breakdown of education as to the meaning of the Covenant in the Presbyterian church and home? This utter failure is in contrast to the incredible success of the dispensationalist educational enterprise on every level! We must ever be on our guard against the hypocrisy of holding to Covenant theology in theory but not in practice. We must put our confession into practice by building the Church.

Building The Church

The *practical* principle of consistent Christianity has to do with its Presbyterian doctrine of the church, and of the

Christian life as life in covenant with God lived in the power of the Holy Spirit in the context of the visible church Presbyterian. This doctrine and the life prescribed by it simply flow from the Calvinistic and Covenant theology of the Bible. Living by this principle in its Scriptural fullness involves the task of building the church.

This task presupposes, of course, the activity of God in history in calling out a people for His name and establishing them in the corporate life of the visible church. The ultimate aim is the eternal salvation of the true church, but this aim is never to be conceived apart from the task of building the visible church, or in any way which depreciates the importance of this institution and this task. For outside this visible church 'there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.'⁶

Now in view of the particular history which is our concern, and of the contemporary scene, we may well lament in the words of the old Reformed Presbyterians: 'The visible Church, divided into factions, and encumbered with a mass of irreligious professors, presents in every place an appearance which fills the serious mind with pain.'⁷ However, of this task of building the visible church we must not despair, if we are to be faithful to the Lord and His revealed Word; and while the facts of this history and of the contemporary scene may be cause for discouragement, they may also lead us to reflect upon the nature of our task, the obstacles of the past, and the opportunities of the present.

Now these facts reflect various obstacles to the building of the Presbyterian Church. Of these obstacles, we may mention some of the major ones with a view to shedding some light upon the problems of the past and the responsibilities of the present.

The first obstacle plain and simple, is *opposition to the*

6. WCF XXV, ii. One is reminded of the appropriateness of the old catholic dictum (without thereby approving of all that was meant by it): *Extra ecclesiam non salus est*—'Outside the church (visible) there is no salvation.'

7. RPK. 75.

Presbyterian view of the church in both of its historic versions—that is, the state church ideal of the old Reformed Presbyterians and the free church ideal of American Presbyterianism. This opposition takes various forms both theoretical and practical: for example, the general hostility of the modern world and church to Presbyterian ecclesiastical principles, the general anti-ecclesiastical and independent spirit of many professing Christians, independent principles of church government, and widespread opposition to Reformed doctrine, Covenant theology, infant baptism, and family religion.

Nevertheless, despite all this opposition we must hold to the Biblical doctrine of the church and continue to persevere in the stupendous task of building the church according to the general ecclesiastical principles laid down in the revealed pattern. We need, in this sense, to be the exponents of a more militant Presbyterianism. We must beware of being satisfied with a Biblical theology without a Biblical ecclesiology—especially in these days when many Christians are willing to settle for the one without the other. Indeed, one of the crying needs of the hour is a fresh Biblical apology for the Presbyterian view of the Church. However, since Presbyterian ecclesiology has been unacceptable to many, not so much because of any lack of Biblical basis but because of the historical failures of Presbyterians, no doubt the most effective apology would be the clear-cut example of Presbyterian principles at work in a nourishing Presbyterian Church.

This observation leads to the mention of a second obstacle to building the church, namely *Presbyterian unfaithfulness to the Presbyterian view of the church*; for Presbyterians have consistently failed to take seriously basic Presbyterian principles. Part of the explanation for this is no doubt the loftiness of the principles in comparison with the weakness of those responsible to put them into practice, but whatever the reason, the fact remains that very often Presbyterians profess one thing on paper and exhibit another in practice.

One example of this unfaithfulness to the Presbyterian

view of the church is the continuous disrespect for Presbyterian principles of church government, the recurrent failure to put them into practice, the constant tendency to suspend them in the interest of expediency. How often in this history has the sidestepping of this noble system, this precious legacy designed to take account of human weakness and sinfulness, wrought havoc in the church? How often have the professed procedures of the church been neglected with disastrous consequences? How often has the principle been sacrificed to the personal? In view of this fact, we must recognize the necessity of respecting the safeguards of the system and make up our minds that we are either going to operate by the book or forget the enterprise.

At the same time, we must not forget that church government is never an end in itself, that the ultimate purpose of Presbyterian principles is identical with that of the church, namely the glory of God in the salvation of sinners. Indeed, another example of unfaithfulness to the Presbyterian view of the church is the failure to exploit the evangelistic possibilities of Presbyterian ecclesiology. Of all the tragedies of Presbyterian history this is perhaps the greatest. For the Presbyterian Church is by virtue of conformity to the Biblical design an institution without parallel in evangelistic potential, but though tailor-made to carry out the Great Commission, its potential has scarcely ever been tapped. It is indeed a curious fact that the Baptist Church and the Methodist Church, not the Presbyterian Church, have been the great evangelistic institutions of American church history.

This is not the place to spell out the particulars of this potential, but simply to call attention to one factor which, among others, may explain this lamentable fact. This factor may be described as that cursed corner of the traditional Presbyterian mind which, consciously or unconsciously, continues to think in terms of reforming an existing church rather than in terms of building a new church. Rather than thinking in terms of establishing strong Presbyterian churches

by evangelizing the ungodly, it thinks in terms of maintaining the Church by attracting Christians, preferably those of Presbyterian background, into the fold. There are in this history two classic and tragic examples of this attitude: first, the old Reformed Presbyterian tendency to think in terms of maintaining the church with Presbyterian immigrants from Scotland and Ireland; second, the tendency of the Presbyterian Separatist Movement to think in terms of building the church with come-outers from apostate denominations. One unhealthy result of this tendency, among others, is a strained, self-conscious preoccupation with the Church's image.

No doubt this outlook is traceable to the state-church mentality of the old world, or perhaps to a one-sided view of Presbyterian ecclesiology. At any rate, whatever the explanation, as long as this attitude prevails in the RPCES, the Church will never grow but remain self-condemned to stagnation. We should be like the early church, had it continued to think only in terms of evangelizing the Jews, and maybe if more of our church members were our own converts, trained in Biblical, Calvinistic, and Presbyterian principles from the ground up, there would be less need to continue to harp on the necessity of self-reformation!

A further example of unfaithfulness to Presbyterian principles is the willingness to tolerate among church officers all sorts of blatantly unpresbyterian, let alone unchristian, views. Church discipline, that great New Testament concern and Presbyterian principle, has been all too often a dead letter; or if it has been operative, it has been all too often abused. Effective church discipline is difficult to practice, especially in twentieth century America; but the difficulties involved afford no adequate excuse for unfaithfulness to revealed truth.

The classic example of this lack of discipline is, of course, the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. in the form of the Broadening Church—although even that Church would resort to 'discipline' to protect its own broad church interests. Thus a third

obstacle to building the church is *Presbyterian inclusivism* as exemplified by the Broadening Church. To this camp there must be no question of return; the separatist position must be maintained, and this must be the case not only because it is the Biblical position, but because, in the final analysis, only the Presbyterian separatist position offers an adequate ecclesiastical alternative to modernistic ecumenism. Only the Presbyterian ecclesiastical system is equipped to offer serious resistance to the ecumenical juggernaut. In the light of this, we may suggest that the capture of the ecclesiastical organization of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., was modernistic ecumenism's greatest triumph in America.

A fourth obstacle, on the other hand, is *Presbyterian exclusivism*—that is, that condescending, self-righteous attitude toward other evangelical churches which desires to major on differences with them rather than on what is held in common. We must be careful to shun this outlook. We must cooperate with these brethren whenever possible and refrain from needlessly offending or alienating them. For while we cannot water down our Presbyterianism to please them, we can show them by our love and example a more excellent way. There is also another form of Presbyterian exclusivism which must also be avoided. This is the attempt to limit the Presbyterian fold to the confines of a narrow sect in which, for ecclesiastical harmony to exist, everyone must agree on details of interpretation, doctrine, life, worship, government, and policy. We can learn from the results of the old Reformed Presbyterian tendency to fall into this snare.

Finally, it would be profitable to touch upon what can easily become an obstacle to building the church, the *church union issue*. Certainly this has been a disruptive and divisive issue in the past and could readily become so in the present and future. With respect to it, we may be permitted to make three observations.

First, given the Biblical and Presbyterian doctrine of the unity of the visible church, the question of establishing

organizational union with other like-minded ecclesiastical organizations is one of the utmost importance and in no way to be belittled. We ought to seek organizational unity wherever it is possible without serious compromise and do all in our power to explore the possibility of achieving such whenever the opportunity presents itself. At the same time, we must realize that the witness of church history, including that of the New Testament itself, provides us with salient reminders that, given sin-cursed circumstances, organizational unity may be impossible or undesirable and ecclesiastical division necessary or desirable. We may note, for example, the break with the Jewish Church, the Protestant Reformation, and the Bible Presbyterian division in 1956.

Second, it is very possible for the church union issue to draw attention away from other important matters, especially the regular evangelistic and disciplining ministry of the church. This commonly happens where the prophets of union give the impression that organizational division is a symbol of all ills, and that church union is the solution to all problems; or vice versa, when the apostles of opposition to union appear to propound that organizational distinctness is a badge of Christian maturity, and that a concern for the visible unity of the church is the root of all evil. Whatever else we may think, let us agree that neither the success nor failure of any particular union proposal is any substitute for the regular evangelical ministry of our Church. Whatever opinions we may have about any particular church union issue, let us agree that its resolution one way or another is not the solution of all the problems facing the Church. Above all, let us be very careful not to allow any such issue to disturb, disrupt, or detract from the day by day effort to fulfill the Great Commission.

Third, the church union issue provides a special opportunity to fall prey to a subtle snare, a trap in which the Presbyterian, by virtue of the nature of his ecclesiastical system, is especially apt to fall. This is the temptation to neglect

the work of the local church in the process of pursuing some issue before the Church at large. Of course, it goes without saying that all presbyters should be concerned with such issues; this concern, however, should not interfere with the vital routine of winning converts, disciplining believers, and establishing churches. At the bottom of this snare is that old lust for recognition with which we constantly struggle. The world is a big pond, and in it we are such little frogs—but the church is a much smaller pond, and in it we can be much bigger frogs. This is always the temptation; and the smaller the church, the bigger the temptation!

A Burning Love

Many other comments and observations regarding this history could be made, and many other questions raised, but it is hoped that the foregoing discussion is sufficient, first, to stimulate the mind of the concerned reader to think through these questions on his own; and second, to kindle in his heart a burning passion for that consistent Christianity which is consistent Presbyterianism, and for its embodiment in the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod.

Indeed, it would be difficult to conceal the fact that the ultimate aim of this history has not been the impartation of information but the impartation of an attitude. In brief this attitude amounts to a love for the Bible, the Gospel, and the Church—a love for a particular Church, the RPCES, as an aspect of our love for Christ. May this love be the foundation of a sense of mission to help build the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ by building up our own particular branch of the Church.

May each one of us respond to this history and the challenge which it presents by saying quietly in his heart, ‘Count me in!’ May we all say with the prophet of the Old Covenant:

I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decketh

himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorneth herself with her jewels. . . . For Zion's sake will I not hold my peace, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until the righteousness thereof go forth as brightness, and the salvation thereof as a lamp that burneth. And the Gentiles shall see thy righteousness, and all kings thy glory: and thou shalt be called by a new name, which the mouth of the LORD shall name. . . . For as a young man marieth a virgin, so shall thy sons marry thee: and as the bridegroom rejoiceth over the bride, so shall thy God rejoice over thee. I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem, which shall never hold their peace day nor night: ye that make mention of the LORD, keep not silence, and give him no rest, till he establish, and till he make Jerusalem a praise in the earth (Is. 61:10; 62:1, 2, 5-7).

At the same time, may we realize that this vision will never be fully realized until that day when the city of God, the new Jerusalem, shall be unveiled (Rev. 21:1 ff.). Until then we must like our father, Abraham, serve the Lord looking ultimately for 'the city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God' (Heb. 11:12). We must all heed the words of the prophet of the New Covenant:

Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate. Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach. For here we have no continuing city, but we seek one to come. By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name. But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased. Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you (Heb. 13:12-17).

Finally, we may be moved by the words of one whose tireless love for the visible church flowed from his wonderment at the grace of God and his fervent love for the Lord Jesus Christ: 'Since a man cannot rise of his own will as he fell by his own will, let us hold with firm faith the right hand of God, Jesus Christ our Lord, which is stretched out to us. Let us wait for Him with steadfast hope; let us love Him with burning love.'⁸

8. Augustine, *De Libero Arbitrio*. II, xx, 205. For translation see St. Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will* (ed. A. S. Benjamin and L. H. Hackstaff), 1965, 84.