

We, the members of this Covenant Union, are resolved, in accordance with God's Word, and in humble reliance upon His grace, to maintain the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., (1) making every effort to bring about a reform of the existing church organization, and to restore the Church's clear and glorious Christian testimony, which Modernism and indifferentism have now so grievously silenced, but (2) if such efforts fail and in particular if the tyrannical policy of the present majority triumphs, holding ourselves ready to perpetuate the true Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., regardless of cost.

*Constitutional Covenant Union (1935)*

## 6

# The Presbyterian Separatist Movement

**A**S the modernist-indifferentist grip upon the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. grew ever tighter in the years immediately following the reorganization of Princeton in 1929, the fundamentalists were faced with the question as to what their ultimate relationship to the Church would be. Most decided to stay in a Church controlled by modernists. Some stayed no doubt for personal reasons, others were strongly influenced by the modernist view of the Church, and still others had some hope of reform from within. However, there was a small movement which under the leadership of J. Gresham Machen led to a new Presbyterian church organization in 1936.

Thus the prophetic utterance of B. B. Warfield that there would be no great split in the Church was borne out by the course of events. At the same time, the hope of a new beginning was realized in the Presbyterian Separatist Movement under Machen's leadership.<sup>1</sup> An understanding of this movement and its development in the 1930's is essential to understand the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod.

### **Christianity and Liberalism**

Just before withdrawal from the Church in 1936, Dr. Machen remarked: 'The issue in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. is an issue between modernism and the Christian

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1. For an account of Warfield's remarks to Machen, see the end of [Chapter 5](#).

religion,<sup>2</sup> or as he expressed it in his initial reaction to the Auburn Affirmation: ‘The plain fact is that two mutually exclusive religions are being proclaimed in the pulpits of the Presbyterian Church.’<sup>3</sup> This basic outlook of Machen is at the bottom of the Presbyterian Separatist Movement. It had been presented in detail years earlier in his famous book *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923).

This book, which is in a sense the manifesto of the Presbyterian Separatist Movement, is according to the eminent commentator Walter Lippmann the ‘best popular argument’ produced in the fundamentalist-modernist controversy.<sup>4</sup> Its central thesis is that ‘despite the use of traditional language modern liberalism is not only a different religion from Chris-

2. *Presbyterian Guardian (PG)*, April 6, 1936, 18.

3. N. B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir*, 1955, 366. The man who wants to understand the Presbyterian Separatist Movement should begin with a careful reading of this biography.

4. *Ibid.*, 348. The full comment (*A Preface to Morals*, 1929) is: ‘It is an admirable book. For its acumen, for its saliency, and for its wit, this cool and stringent defense of orthodox Protestantism is, I think, the best popular argument produced by either side in the controversy. We shall do well to listen to Dr. Machen. The Liberals have yet to answer him.’ Others, who could hardly be considered sympathetic, have paid similar tribute to Machen and his writings, although not without what appears to be artificial criticism. Cf. the following: W. S. Hudson, *Religion in America*, 1965, 370: ‘Nowhere was the Fundamentalist case stated with more clarity and cogency than in Machen’s writings, but his ill-tempered dogmatism in personal relationships and his determination to dominate the life of the seminary [*i.e.*, Princeton] drove even staunchly conservative colleagues to make common cause with the Auburn “Affirmationists.” N. F. Furniss, *The Fundamentalist Controversy 1918-1931*, 1954, 127 f.: ‘J. Gresham Machen was a strange bedfellow for most Fundamentalists. A man of great erudition, who had graduated from Princeton University and Seminary and had studied at Marburg and Gottingen, he offered a startling contrast to the less educated champions of orthodoxy who relied for the force of their argument upon bombast, or at least rhetoric’ But Furniss cannot help characterizing Machen as ‘a hot-tempered imaginative person’ (140) with a ‘blazing temper’ (128). But the statement of S. G. Cole (*The History of Fundamentalism*, 1931, 126) takes the prize. He writes in connection with the Baltimore General Assembly of 1926: ‘Not a few commissioners distrusted the leadership of this militant man. They had observed his appeal to crowd psychology in his use of the subtleties of Calvinistic logic. They had witnessed his public stand against the Eighteenth Amendment, and had read his uncharitable remarks about his colleagues.’ For a more objective judgment, see eminent commentator H. L. Mencken in *Current History*, 24 (1926), 411. For Machen’s views on the alcohol question, see Stonehouse, 387 f.

tianity but belongs in a totally different class of religions.<sup>5</sup> For while liberalism is rooted in naturalism, Christianity is consistently supernaturalistic in that it presupposes the possibility and actuality of God's exercising power in the world immediately, that is, above and beyond the natural order of things. Naturalistic liberalism is thus nothing more than ancient, sophisticated paganism in modern garb.<sup>6</sup>

Liberalism, Machen said, is imbued with the modernistic principle in that it aims to reconcile Christianity and modern science by modernizing the former in the light of the latter. As such its subtlety makes it the chief modern rival of true Christianity. For in attempting to apply Christianity to modern life, it has modernized it out of existence. There can be no applied Christianity without a Christianity to apply, a Christianity different from that to which it is to be applied.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, liberalism is neither scientific nor Christian. It is unscientific because, unlike Christianity, it is not in accordance with the facts of history. For instance, it is utterly unscientific both in the misrepresentation of what historic Christianity is and in its preposterous claim to be Christian.

This is the main point: liberalism is simply not historic Christianity. For instance, it claims that Christianity is not a doctrine, but a life. However, this is radically false, for Christianity is based upon the historical facts of the Gospel and is at bottom evangelical teaching concerning those facts, so that without this teaching there can be no genuine Christian life; whereas, liberalism is just so many human aspirations.<sup>8</sup> 'Here is found the most fundamental difference between liberalism and Christianity—liberalism is altogether in the imperative mood, while Christianity begins with a triumphant indicative;

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5. J. G. Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism (C&L)*, 1923, 7.

6. *C&L*, 2, 99 *et al.*

7. *C&L*, 5-7, 54, 155.

8. *C&L*, 19 ff. Cf. Stonehouse, 376: 'Christian doctrine, I hold, is not merely connected with the gospel, but it is identical with the gospel.'

liberalism appeals to man's will, while Christianity announces, first, a gracious act of God.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, without certain fundamental doctrines there is no Christianity at all. For true Christian faith, in that it involves intellectual assent to certain doctrines, is opposed to the anti-intellectual, pragmatism of liberalism.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, in *What Is Faith* (1925), a work in which Machen gives a much fuller statement of this assertion, he speaks of 'the retrograde anti-intellectual movement called Modernism.'<sup>11</sup>

With respect to the specific doctrines of the Christian Faith, Machen proceeds to show that Christianity and liberalism have radically different doctrines of God and man, the Bible, Christ, salvation, and the Church. The reason why liberalism is thus 'totally different from Christianity' is that the foundation is different. 'Christianity is founded upon the Bible. It bases upon the Bible both its thinking and its life. Liberalism on the other hand is founded upon the shifting emotions of men.'<sup>12</sup>

If evangelical Christianity and modernistic liberalism are two entirely different, mutually exclusive religions, what about modernism in the Church? 'Christianity is being attacked from within by a movement which is anti-Christian to the core.'<sup>13</sup> Obviously Christians and anti-Christians cannot continue indefinitely in the same Church. One or the other will have to go. Christianity and modernism cannot co-exist in a true Christian church. There is not room for both in the Church of Christ.

This does not mean that every church member with doubts about Christianity must leave the Church. However, it does mean that simple honesty ought to compel modernists to leave the teaching ministry of the Church. How can they

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9. *C&L*, 47 ff., 52, 58 *et al.*

10. *C&L*, 142 *et al.*

11. J. G. Machen, *What Is Faith?*, 1925, 18.

12. *C&L*, 79.

13. *C&L*, 173.

in all honesty presume to teach contrary to the Bible and the Confession which they have solemnly sworn to uphold?

Nor is the issue a personal one of judging whether individual modernists or modernist-sympathizers are born-again Christians or not. That no one can judge. However, the issue is far deeper, whether one's teaching is Christian or not. 'It is highly undesirable that liberalism and Christianity should continue to be propagated within the bounds of the same organization. A separation between the two parties in the Church is the crying need of the hour.'<sup>14</sup>

Such a demand for separation would not be an instance of intolerance. For the church is not an involuntary but a voluntary organization. 'An evangelical church is composed of a number of persons who have come to agreement in a certain message about Christ and who desire to unite in the propagation of that message, as it is set forth in their creed on the basis of the Bible.' Since no one is forced to associate with such an organization, the church has a right to insist that its organization function for the purpose for which it was originally founded.<sup>15</sup>

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14. *C&L*, 160ff.

15. *C&L*, 167 f. L. A. Loetscher remarks in *The Broadening Church* (1954) concerning Machen's conception of the church: 'This was good Anabaptist doctrine and might even pass for Congregationalism, but it certainly was not Presbyterianism. The Presbyterian conception of the Church is organic. Presbyterian doctrine is normally that people are born into the Church [the footnote at this point appeals to WCF, XXV, ii]. At this important point Dr. Machen's battle for orthodoxy had led him to serious unorthodoxy as judged by the very standards he was so ardently seeking to defend' (*BC*, 117). This contention scarcely needs refutation. As if the Presbyterian doctrine of the church could ever be construed to allow for those born into the church to propagate doctrine contrary to the purpose of the church's existence! Nor was Machen an independent or an Anabaptist—although he did firmly believe in the Anabaptist doctrine of the separation of church and state, as did all American Presbyterians. Furthermore, the above definition of a church is merely a restatement of the Form of Government, II, iv. It is interesting that, although Loetscher came to repudiate Machen's ecclesiastical position, he was for a time, while a student at Princeton University, greatly moved by Machen's 'clear-cut and persuasive presentation of fundamental evangelicalism' at the First Presbyterian Church of Princeton (Stonehouse, 361 f). Neither Loetscher nor his father (F. W. Loetscher, Professor of Church History at Princeton Seminary) are mentioned by name, but one may reasonably assume that they are the parties referred to. It is also interesting that E. J. Carnell in his unfortunate *History Behind the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod*, pp. 194-243.

What if the liberals refuse to follow the course of honesty and separate from the Church? What if they gain control of the Church? What then?

If the liberal party really obtains full control of the councils of the Church, then no evangelical Christian can continue to support the Church's work. If a man believes that salvation from sin comes only through the atoning death of Jesus, then he cannot honestly support by his gifts and by his presence a propaganda which is intended to produce an exactly opposite impression. To do so would mean the most terrible bloodguiltiness which it is possible to conceive. If the liberal party, therefore, really obtains control of the Church, evangelical Christians must be prepared to withdraw no matter what it costs.<sup>16</sup>

It is significant that there were many liberals who agreed with Machen's basic thesis in *Christianity and Liberalism*. For instance, the modernist *Christian Century* set forth the following viewpoint at the beginning of 1924:

The differences between Fundamentalism and modernism are not mere surface differences which can be amiably waved aside or disregarded, but they are foundation differences, structural differences, amounting in their radical dissimilarity almost to the differences between two distinct religions. . . . Two world views, two moral ideals, two sets of personal attitudes, have clashed, and it is a case of ostrich-like intelligence blindly to deny and evade the searching and serious character of the issue. Christianity, according to fundamentalism, is one religion. Christianity, according to Modernism, is another religion. . . . Christianity is hardly likely to last much longer half-fundamentalist and half-modernist. It is not merely the aggressiveness of fundamentalism that is forcing a choice, it is the inherent nature of the issue itself.<sup>17</sup>

In 1925 Machen preached a sermon in the chapel of Princeton Theological Seminary entitled *The Separateness of*

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nate book *The Case for Orthodox Theology* (1961, 114 ff.) follows Loetscher's line.

16. *C&L*, 166.

17. *Christian Century*, Jan. 3, 1924. Cf. also the viewpoint of a group of Unitarians: 'With all courtesy and consideration, let us make it plain that religious teachers who play with words in the most solemn relations of life, who make their creeds mean what they were not originally intended to mean, or mentally reject a formula of belief while outwardly repeating it, cannot expect to retain the allegiance of men who are accustomed to straight thinking and square dealing.' Both quotations are cited in Stonehouse, 366. Cf. the judgment of Cole (*op. cit.*, 64) who, upon looking back to the controversy of the 1920's, writes 'Two cultures clashed within the Christian Church.'

*the Church*, in which he maintained that if the sharp distinction between the Church and the world is ever blurred, then the Church loses its power; the salt has lost its savour and is henceforth good for nothing (Matt. 5:13). However, such is the present case with the modernism in the Presbyterian Church, and woe unto those who cry for peace in the Church in the face of this danger. For Jesus himself said, 'He that is not with me is against me' (Matt. 12:30). An inclusivist Church, indifferent to doctrine, like that desired by the Auburn Affirmationist could not be the true Church of Jesus Christ. Such have not yet gained the upper hand in the Church; but should that happen, it may be that Christian men will have to withdraw from a Church having lost its distinctness from the world.<sup>18</sup>

This separatist concept of the Church as represented by Machen is essential to the Presbyterian Separatist Movement.<sup>19</sup> For it is radically opposed to the inclusivist view of the modernists and indifferentists. According to Machen, it is not enough to be a fundamentalist in doctrine generally without being a fundamentalist in one's doctrine of the Church. In fact, one cannot be a true fundamentalist without a separatist view of the Church. For to endorse unbelief is itself unbelief. Those 'conservatives' who can tolerate liberalism in the Church are themselves unsound.

Machen appealed to the distinctively Presbyterian principle of the corporate responsibility of the members of the Church. Every Christian is an individual witness for the Lord.

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18. J. G. Machen, *The Separateness of the Church*, 1925, 3, 4, 15. The sermon is reprinted in J. G. Machen, *God Transcendent* (ed. N. B. Stonehouse), 1949, 97-107.

19. See the informative article by D. C. Jones, 'Machen's Ecclesiology,' *PG*, Oct. 1963, 134 ff. This is an excellent, well-documented summary of Machen's doctrine of the Church. For an unsympathetic account, see D. M. Roark, 'J. Gresham Machen: The Doctrinally True Presbyterian Church,' *Journal of Presbyterian History*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (June, 1965), 124-138; Vol. 43, No. 3 (Sept., 1965), 174-181. This article is based upon a Ph.D. thesis at Iowa State University: D. M. Roark, *J. Gresham Machen and His Desire to Maintain a Doctrinally True Presbyterian Church* (University Microfilms), 1963.

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However, Christian witness-bearing is not only individual, but collective. Every single Christian is thus responsible for the corporate witness of the Church. One cannot say: 'I will witness for Christ, but it is not my business what comes from other pulpits in the Church.' 'Under Presbyterian law, no man can permanently occupy a pulpit of the Church without the Church's endorsement; the preacher speaks not only for himself, but for the Church.' One cannot be a Christian at prayer meeting or in the pulpit and be anti-Christian at presbytery or in the General Assembly. Thus true Presbyterianism demands separation from a false Church.<sup>20</sup>

What, according to Machen, is a true Christian Church? First of all, it is radically doctrinal. It will not be devoted to any sort of skeptical pragmatism; it will not confuse the useful with the true. It will have experience determined by doctrine and not doctrine by experience. Moreover, it is radically intolerant—that is, it maintains the exclusiveness and universality of its message. Finally, it is radically ethical in that, despite many imperfections, it attempts to conform its life to the standards which it professes. However, this does not mean that it cooperates with non-Christian religion or non-Christian ethical schemes. Nor, in its corporate capacity, does it make any official pronouncements upon contemporary social or political questions, for its sole mission is to bring the Gospel to bear upon the needs of sinful men.<sup>21</sup>

As a world-renowned New Testament scholar, Machen's attitude is derived from his appreciation of the New Testament emphasis on the visible Church and a clear witness to the Gospel in the world. At stake in the purity of this witness is the Gospel itself, the only hope of any man. It is for this very reason that 'at the very basis of the work of the apos-

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20. Jones, *op. left*, 139.

21. *What Is Christianity*, 283-286, 'The Responsibility of the Church in Our New Age.' Machen did, however, believe that the individual Christian should be deeply concerned with social and political questions as this group of essays amply demonstrates. For an account of his own personal involvement in such questions, see Stonehouse, 395 ff.

tolitic Church is the consciousness of a terrible responsibility.<sup>22</sup> The Presbyterian Separatist Movement is animated above all by this consciousness. Such a sense of duty and responsibility is basic to Machen's character and helps to explain his leadership of the movement. Since Machen's leadership is so crucial to the movement, we may profitably pause at this point to account for why he took the position he did.

As is amply illustrated in the biography by Ned Stonehouse, Machen received from his Christian and cultured upbringing a profound love of truth unspoiled by modern pragmatism on the one hand; and, on the other, a deep sense of duty to the truth, which in terms of his upbringing was historic Presbyterianism presented as a broad Christian world and life view. This love of truth for truth's sake and practical sense of duty to the truth combined to give him a pervasive sense of personal honesty. Now it was just this sense that for many years precluded his entering the Christian ministry. For, brainwashed by modern thought, he had grave doubts about the truth of the Christian religion; and although he was urged to do so, he could not bring himself to take those solemn ordination vows by which one is initiated into the eldership of the Presbyterian Church.<sup>23</sup>

With its agnostic and pragmatic approach to ultimate truth, modernism proposed a way out of this dilemma. However, although Machen had studied in Germany under the leading liberal scholars of the day, and been greatly moved by them, his sense of honesty prevented him from buying their line of goods, which he knew was a far cry from historic

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22. *C&L*, 124. Cf. *PG*, March 16, 1936, 194.

23. Stonehouse, 78 ff., 113 ff., *et al.* Cf. J. G. Machen, *Christianity in Conflict* (Reprinted from V. Ferm, ed., *Contemporary American Theology*, 1932, 245-273), n.d., 261: 'Obviously it is impossible to hold on with the heart to something that one has rejected with the head, and all the usefulness of Christianity can never lead you to be Christians unless the Christian religion is true. But is it true or not? That is a serious question indeed.' This is a most remarkable autobiographical article.

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Christianity. Moreover, modernism failed to meet his deepest intellectual and moral needs. However, eventually through years of deep personal struggle these needs had been met by the historic Christian faith in which he had been brought up. As he availed himself of the means of grace, although feeling like a hypocrite much of the time, he had become convinced of the truth of Christianity and of his own duty in the light of that truth. This calling meant ordination and a scholarly ministry in defense of the historic Christian faith. Thus when Machen finally took his vows in 1915 at the age of 35, he did so honestly, with fear and trembling on the one hand, and great joy on the other.<sup>24</sup>

However, this experience meant that while he had great sympathy with the intellectual difficulties of the modernists, he had no sympathy whatsoever for their dishonesty in taking an oath to uphold doctrines which they really did not believe. ‘As for their difficulties with the Christian faith, I have profound sympathy for them, but not with their contemptuous treatment of the conscientious men who believe that a creed solemnly subscribed to is more than a scrap of paper.’<sup>25</sup> In the face of this intolerable situation in the Church, Machen felt that there was no recourse but to speak up in defense of apostolic Christianity. ‘There could be no greater mistake than to suppose that a man in those days could *think* as he liked and still be a follower of Jesus.’<sup>26</sup> Just so in our day one has to choose whether to follow Jesus or his own imagination. However, having in all honesty committed himself to the evangelical doctrines of historic Christian-

24. *Ibid.*, 190 ff. *et al.* Note the following comments of Stonehouse: ‘Back of that first big step [*i.e.*, ordination] stood years of indecision and perplexity and even times of torturing doubt, as this narrative has taken some pains to show. . . Having arrived at such convictions through fierce struggle, and having counted the cost of such commitment, he could be expected to stand by them through thick and thin, regardless of the opposition that he might encounter by doing so.’ See also his ordination sermon ‘Rejoice With Trembling’ reprinted in *God Transcendent*, *op. cit.*

25. *Ibid.*, 221 f.

26. *What Is Faith?*, 138 (*cf.* 41, 69, 101 f.).

ity, he must at all cost defend the gospel by word and deed especially when the Church is threatened with being overcome by a contrary 'gospel.'<sup>27</sup>

Through deep personal anguish Machen had come to an ever greater appreciation of the basic tenets of Calvinistic doctrine. His mother had once commented to him that Christ keeps firmer hold on us than we keep on Him. Recalling this offhand comment many years later, he remarks: 'Calvinism is a very comforting doctrine indeed. Without its comfort I should have perished long ago in the castle of Giant Despair.'<sup>28</sup> At the same time—after toying with the idea of falling back on a supposedly 'Biblical' Christianity which relinquishes the real, or supposed rigidities of the Reformed Faith—he had come to see with Warfield that the consistent Christianity professed by historic Presbyterianism is the easiest Christianity to defend. 'When once a man has come into sympathetic contact with the noble tradition of the Reformed Faith, he will never readily be satisfied with that "Fundamentalism" that seeks in some hasty modern statement a greatest common measure between men of different creeds.'<sup>29</sup>

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27. *What Is Christianity*, 260. Cf. Stonehouse, 226 *et al.*

28. *Christianity in Conflict*, 264.

29. *Ibid.*, 249; cf. 254. Cf. Machen's statement in 1927 when he refused the offer to become president of the newly-founded William Jennings Bryan Memorial University (Stonehouse, 428): 'I have the warmest sympathy, indeed, with interdenominational efforts of various kinds. . . . Nevertheless, thoroughly consistent Christianity, to my mind, is found only in the Reformed or Calvinistic Faith; and consistent Christianity, I think, is the Christianity easiest to defend. Hence I never call myself a "Fundamentalist." There is, indeed, no inherent objection to the term; and if the disjunction is between "Fundamentalism" and "Modernism," then I am willing to call myself a Fundamentalist of the most pronounced type. But after all, what I prefer to call myself is not a "Fundamentalist" but a "Calvinist"—that is, an adherent of the Reformed Faith. As such I regard myself as standing in the great central current of the Church's life—the current which flows down from the Word of God through Augustine and Calvin, and which has found noteworthy expression in America in the great tradition represented by Charles Hodge and Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield and the other representatives of the "Princeton School." I have the warmest sympathy with other evangelical churches, and a keen sense of agreement with them about those Christian convictions which are today being most insistently assailed; but, for the present at least, I

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However, the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., willing to harbor anti-Christian sentiments in its very bosom, was far from a consistently Christian Church. It needed to be reformed in its actual condition as well as Reformed in its constitutional tradition.

### **A New Reformation**

At least as early as 1923 Machen had called for ‘a new Reformation.’ It was hoped that the conservatives in the Presbyterian Church could, by united action, effect a reformation as great as that of the sixteenth century. As a result there was considerable activity in this direction on the part of Machen and others in the form of fundamentalist societies, rallies, and propaganda. The appeal was to the evangelical rank and file of the Church to rise up and save the Church from modernism.<sup>30</sup> ‘A true Reformation,’ Machen wrote in 1925, ‘would be characterized by just what is missing in the Modernism of the present day; it would be characterized above all by an heroic honesty which for the sake of principle would push all consideration of consequences aside.’<sup>31</sup>

As the situation grew from bad to worse, Machen saw ever more clearly what other conservative leaders in the Church shrank from seeing, namely, that reformation in the twentieth century might very well mean a split in the existing Church organization, as it had in the sixteenth. He foresaw that the Broadening Church will not tolerate fundamentalists who are really bent on reform; it is not broad enough for them. ‘There will be liberty in the Presbyterian Church for Modernists, but none for conservatives; and those who hold the conservative view will have to go elsewhere for the maintenance of those convictions that are dearer than life itself.’<sup>32</sup>

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think I can best serve my fellow-Christians—even those who belong to ecclesiastical bodies different from my own—by continuing to be identified, very specifically, with the Presbyterian Church.’

30. *C&L*, 16 (cf. 178). *BC*, 114-116.

31. *What Is Faith?*, 103 (cf. 18).

32. *The Attack Upon Princeton Seminary*, 10 f.

Machen was convinced that the reorganization of Princeton Theological Seminary would mark the end of an epoch in the modern Church and 'the beginning of a new era in which new evangelical agencies must be formed.' Certainly it would mean at the very least the founding of a truly evangelical seminary to supply the Church with a truly evangelical ministry.<sup>33</sup>

The reorganization of Princeton led directly to the establishment of three evangelical agencies all centered in the Philadelphia area: Westminster Theological Seminary in 1929, the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions in 1933, and the Presbyterian Constitutional Covenant Union in 1935.

Westminster Seminary was founded to continue the tradition of old Princeton in the scholarly defense of the Bible and the Christian Faith. It is independent of church control, but definitely Presbyterian and not interdenominational or nondenominational in spirit in that its trustees and faculty are committed to the infallibility of the Bible, the Westminster Confession, and Presbyterian principles of church government. It is not to sacrifice the whole counsel of God as found in the Reformed Faith in the interest of a vague, non-Calvinistic fundamentalism. In Machen's words:

We believe, first, that the Christian religion, as it is set forth in the Confession of Faith of the Presbyterian Church, is true; we believe, second, that the Christian religion welcomes and is capable of scholarly defense; and we believe, third, that the Christian religion should be proclaimed without fear or favor, and in clear opposition to whatever opposes it, whether within or without the church, as the only way of salvation for lost mankind.<sup>34</sup>

As such the seminary was to be the center of a new Reformation movement. Both faculty and students entered

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33. *Ibid.*, 33, 38.

34. 'Westminster Seminary: Its Plan and Purpose' in *What Is Christianity*, 233, 244 ff., 229. See also E. H. Rian, *The Presbyterian Conflict*, 1940, 88 ff. This work written from the Machen viewpoint, by one who later repudiated that viewpoint, is the most complete account of the Presbyterian Separatist Movement. Its appendix contains documents crucial to its history. Cf. Stonehouse, 446 ff.

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vigorously into the ecclesiastical battle against modernism. As the faculty put it in 1935, 'From the beginning Westminster Seminary has stood for the belief that its classroom teaching is of little value unless it results in vigorously fostering a consistent program of reform in the Church.'<sup>35</sup> However, in Machen's mind this program would eventually lead to a split in the Church. As he hopefully wrote in 1929 after resigning from Princeton, 'A really evangelical seminary might be the beginning of a really evangelical Presbyterian Church.'<sup>36</sup>

As it became increasingly more evident that the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., wanted nothing to do with a consistent program of reform, the seminary became more and more the center of a reform movement with a view to moving outside the existing organization of the Church. It was the growing opinion of the faculty—apart from O. T. Allis, Professor of Old Testament—that the reform party should, in the interest of consistency, maintain its position regardless of ecclesiastical consequences, even to the point of allowing itself to be forced out of the Church. This position was vigorously challenged by Samuel G. Craig, the editor of the conservative Presbyterian periodical *Christianity Today* and a member of the seminary's board of trustees. In the fall of 1935 the faculty, in dismay over Craig's action, petitioned the board to declare its position on the matter of ecclesiastical separation:

The question now is whether the Seminary shall continue in the front rank of the battle, or whether it shall lag in the rear; whether it shall continue to give a hearty God-speed to those who are consistently challenging the present Modernist and indifferentist control of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., or whether it shall, by implication at least, ask them to desist from their present activity and make their protest against Modernism at best in word only and not in deed.<sup>37</sup>

As it turned out, two-thirds of the board, including Dr. Clarence E. Macartney, were opposed to the faculty's stand.

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35. Rian, 299.

36. Stonehouse, 442.

37. Rian, 299 f.

They were by no means prepared to consider leaving the Church of their fathers in the interests of reform. These men were convinced that the Church was still fundamentally sound and had hopes that it could still be reformed from within. Nevertheless, under the influence of Macartney they preferred to step aside and allow Westminster to travel the course prescribed by Dr. Machen and the faculty. Thus in early 1936 Drs. Macartney and Craig, along with the majority of the board and Professor Allis, tendered their resignations and surrendered the seminary to the Presbyterian Separatist Movement.<sup>38</sup>

The issue which brought matters to a head in the Church revolved around the formation of the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions. As early as 1921 it had become clear that the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions was tolerant of modernism. This fact became increasingly clear in 1932 in the Board's attitude toward the well-known publication *Rethinking Missions*. The gist of this book is syncretism: namely that Christianity should join with other world religions in a common front against materialism and immorality. The Board of Missions refused to take a stand against this outlook, or dismiss missionaries who supported it, such as the famous Pearl Buck. Moreover, the Board itself was tolerant of signers of the Auburn Affirmation and was actively disseminating modernist propaganda.<sup>39</sup>

Armed with evidence of these charges, Machen presented an overture to the Presbytery of New Brunswick in early 1933 demanding a thoroughgoing reform of the Board. This overture was defeated in the presbytery, but similar ones were presented by other presbyteries, such as the Presbytery of Philadelphia, to the General Assembly of 1933. However,

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38. Rian, 95-100, 298-302. Cf. 256 ff., 'Reform From Within.'

39. Rian, 127 ff.; Stonehouse, 469 ff. See BC 149 f., where Loetscher admits that 'the theological presuppositions underlying *Rethinking Missions* were not those of traditional Christian orthodoxy. . . . There ran throughout, the implication that Christian truth is relative rather than absolute and that Christianity should cooperate with, rather than try to supplant, the non-Christian religions.'

*History Behind the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod*, pp. 194-243.

these overtures were overwhelmingly defeated, and the Board of Missions was given a clear bill of health.<sup>40</sup>

As a result the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions was formed in June of 1933. Its origin and purpose are well expressed in the statement issued by Machen at the time:

In view of the action of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. resisting the movement for reform of the Board of Foreign Missions, a new Board will be organized by Bible-believing Christians to promote truly Biblical and truly Presbyterian mission work.<sup>41</sup>

According to its constitution, board members were pledged to Presbyterian principles, but the Board itself was to be 'independent' in that it was not to be under the control of, or responsible to, any church organization.<sup>42</sup>

The ecclesiastical organization of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., was not slow to react to what was considered a serious threat to its existence. Presbyteries began to require that candidates for ordination promise to give unqualified support to the boards and agencies of the Church. Shortly before the General Assembly of 1934, the Assembly's General Council published a booklet entitled *Studies in the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.*, in which it is maintained that the Independent Board is an unconstitutional and schismatic threat to the Church. It is unlawful for Presbyterian churches to divert missionary offerings away from the boards of the General Assembly. Indeed, every church member is required to support the official missionary program of the Church in the same sense that he is required to partake of the Lord's Supper; and no one may contribute

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40. Rian, 143 ff., 308 f., Stonehouse, 474 ff. See also J. G. Machen, *Modernism and the Board of Foreign Missions*, 1933. Cf. also C. McIntire, *Evidence of Modernism in the Board of Foreign Missions*, 1935; and the enlarged version, *Dr. Robert E. Speer, The Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. and Modernism*, April 11, 1935.

41. Rian, 146.

42. Rian, 155 f.

through a local church to anything other than the denominational boards and agencies.

A church member or an individual church that will not give to promote the officially authorized missionary program of the Presbyterian Church is in exactly the same position with reference to the Constitution of the Church as a church member or an individual church that would refuse to take part in the celebration of the Lord's Supper or any other of the prescribed ordinances of the denomination.<sup>43</sup>

In this spirit the next General Assembly, by a four to one vote, issued the infamous Mandate of 1934. This deliverance declared that the individual church member is bound to observe the provisions of the Church Constitution in the same sense in which he is bound to believe in Christ. Therefore, those Presbyterians who are associated with the Independent Board must either dissociate themselves from it or leave the Presbyterian Church. Otherwise, 'similar independent movements prompted by the same disloyal and divisive spirit' would inevitably arise. To implement this approach the General Assembly demanded the end of the Independent Board; warned its members that if they did not comply, they would be subject to the discipline of the Church; and directed the presbyteries, after due warning, to begin the judicial process of prosecution.<sup>44</sup>

Those sympathetic to the Independent Board were shocked at the unconstitutional methods which were taken for the express purpose of upholding the Constitution. They were also shocked that the Church would actually discipline men for preaching the Gospel as understood in its Constitution. Moreover, they were convinced that the Independent Board was not unconstitutional. For one thing there was nothing in the Constitution to prohibit Presbyterians from organizing such an agency independent of Church control. Also, how could the Church have any jurisdiction over such an organization? Moreover, the Church's own tradition itself

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43. Rian, 311 (*cf.* 152 f., 309-312). Stonehouse, 482 ff.

44. Rian, 314-320. See 152 ff. for an account of the constitutional irregularities involved in the 1934 General Assembly.

protects the right of the individual Presbyterian and the individual Presbyterian church to support Christian work other than that supervised by the General Assembly, for this right was explicitly guaranteed in the concurrent declarations of 1869.<sup>45</sup>

Nevertheless, judicial proceedings were relentlessly carried on against Machen and the other members of the Board who simply ignored the General Assembly's mandate. When the several overtures to the General Assembly of 1935 that such proceedings be stopped were all defeated as a matter of course, the separatists shortly thereafter formed the Constitutional Covenant Union.<sup>46</sup>

The occasion of the Covenant Union was obviously the modernistic domination of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. Its purpose was to defend the Constitution of the Church—that is, the Bible, the Reformed Faith, and those Presbyterian principles of church government which protect the individual conscience from implicit obedience to Church authority.

The text of the Covenant itself, or pledge, reads as follows:

We, the members of this Covenant Union, are resolved, in accordance with God's Word, and in humble reliance upon His grace, to maintain the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., (1) making every effort to bring about a reform of the existing church organization, and to restore the Church's clear and glorious Christian testimony, which Modernism and indifferentism have now so grievously silenced, but (2) if such efforts fail and in particular if the tyrannical policy of the present majority triumphs, holding ourselves ready to perpetuate the true Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., regardless of cost.<sup>47</sup>

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45. Stonehouse, 485 ff. See Rian, 155 ff. for the arguments of Machen and others against the constitutionality of the Mandate of 1934. See also M. F. Thompson, [\*Have the Organizers of the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions Violated the Law of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.?\*](#) See also the *Presbyterian Re-Union Memorial Volume*, 1871, 310-312, 258, 276.

46. See *Important Actions of the General Assembly of 1935*, June 1935, 7 f. Cf. Rian, 165, 218 ff.

47. Rian, 218 f.; Stonehouse, 495 f. [Cf. PG, Dec. 16, 1935, 94.](#)

The *Presbyterian Guardian* was inaugurated in the fall of 1935 to be the voice of the Covenant Union. Machen wrote in the first issue with a great sense of urgency that ‘in many places the visible Church has been swept away into the full current of the world’s madness.’ The Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. was in the hands of an unscrupulous, tyrannical bureaucracy. In such dark days the Christian cannot trust the visible Church, only the Word of God, the Bible.<sup>48</sup> In subsequent issues the *Guardian* proceeded to show how deeply rooted modernism was in the boards and agencies of the Church, to expose the dubious ethics of the Church bureaucracy, and to censure the ‘evangelical’ middle-of-the-rovers who went along with it.<sup>49</sup>

In the second issue Machen attempts to answer the question ‘What Should Be Done By Christian People Who Are in a Modernist Church?’ Should orthodox people remain in a church dominated by unbelief or separate from it? This question must be answered in the light of the Scriptures. Now the Bible clearly teaches that no church on earth will ever be perfect. However, the Presbyterian Church is not simply an imperfect church but a church ‘very largely *dominated* by unbelief.’ ‘It does not merely harbor unbelief here and there. No, it has made unbelief, in the form of a deadly Modernist vagueness, the determinative force in its central official life.’ However, this is hardly what the Bible means by a church. ‘The Bible commands people to be members of a true church, even though it be an imperfect one.’ Separation must come in the U.S.A. Presbyterian Church. Unquestionably reform would be the best way. However, if reform fails, the Bible commands separation from the existing organization, although it must be made abundantly clear that those who separate are not founding ‘a new church,’ but are carrying on ‘the true, spiritual succession of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.’<sup>50</sup>

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48. [PG, Oct. 7, 1935, 4.](#)

49. E.g., *PG*, April 6, 1936, *et al.* Cf. Rian, 219 ff.; Stonehouse, 496 f.

50. [PG, Oct. 21, 1935, 22.](#)

The editor of the *Guardian*, H. McAllister Griffiths, made clear the separatist implications of the Covenant: Separation will come only if reform fails. However, in that case the signers of the pledge are obligated to separate just as the Reformers left Rome not to destroy the Church but to preserve her. However, who will decide for the members of the Covenant when the time for reform has passed and the hour of separation has come? 'Each individual, Bible in hand, facts in his mind, and prayer for light in his heart, must solemnly make that decision for himself.' As for Griffiths himself, the signal for separation will have come if the General Assembly of 1936 should confirm the constitutionality of the Mandate of 1934 and the outcome of the several judicial decisions based upon it.<sup>51</sup>

This was Machen's opinion as well. Such a decision by the General Assembly, sitting as a court, would mean the dethronement of Christ and the placing of the word of men above the Word of God. The adherents of the Covenant Union are not schismatics. Certainly no Protestant could seriously maintain that every separation is sinful schism. 'It is not schism to break away from an apostate church. Indeed it is schism to remain in an apostate church, since to remain in an apostate church is to separate from the true Church of Jesus Christ.' Any church which, by solemn judicial decision, places the word of men above the Word of God is an apostate church. Every minister and member of the Church is required to support the modernist propaganda of its boards and agencies. It is a question of obeying God or men. No, the U.S.A. Presbyterian Church is 'hopelessly corrupt' in that it cannot be reformed by means of the Christian resources presently in it.<sup>52</sup>

Thus when the General Assembly of 1936 upheld the convictions of Machen and others likewise suspended from the ministry of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., the

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51. [PG, Feb. 17, 1936, 159](#); [Dec. 2, 1935, 71](#); [April 6, 1936, 3](#).

52. [PG, April 20, 1936, 22](#); [May 4, 1936, 42](#); [June 1, 1936, 90](#).

Constitutional Covenant Union disbanded in June of that year to form the Presbyterian Church of America.

### **A True Presbyterian Church**

The Presbyterian Separatist Movement was, as we have seen, based upon the conviction that modernism is in principle and practice an anti-Christian religion; that true Christians cannot indefinitely tolerate it in the Christian Church which is to be separate from the world; that the Church must be reformed to the exclusion of its modernist elements; and that the Church which refuses to be reformed, but forces the reforming in party to conform, thus substituting the word of man for the Word of God, is an apostate church.

It was the ecclesiastical trials whereby evangelical men such as J. Gresham Machen, J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., Harold S. Laird, Charles J. Woodbridge, Paul Woolley, and Carl McIntire, were either deprived of ministerial status or humiliated by official rebuke that convinced the separatists that the Church had become apostate.<sup>53</sup> How could a true Christian Church demand, in the name of Christ, that Christian men support the propagation of an anti-Christian propaganda? How could a true Christian Church use such unconstitutional and unethical methods to silence an uncompromising testimony to the truth? The Church professed to be founded on the Bible. However, a tremendous transformation had taken place between the discipline of Briggs in 1893 for denying the infallibility of the Bible and that of Machen in 1936 for insubordination because he was determined to apply the teachings of an infallible Bible to a fallible Church. Would the Bible pass judgment on the mind of the Church, or the Church pass judgment on the Bible? Would the Biblical doctrine of the

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53. Others tried in their respective presbyteries were H. McAllister Griffiths, Merrill T. MacPherson, Edwin H. Rian, and Roy T. Brumbaugh. For details, see Rian, 171. Cf. H. S. Laird, *Called Out and Cast Out* (Sermon Preached in The First Independent Church of Wilmington, Delaware, Feb. 14, 1937, Reprinted from the *Christian Beacon*). [i.e., *The Christian Beacon* 2.4 (4 March 1937): 3.]

church pass judgment on modern culture, or vice versa? As in the days of the Reformation this was considered to be the issue.<sup>54</sup>

In maintaining that the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., followed in principle as well as practice the latter course, separatists would appeal to the analysis of Lefferts A. Loetscher himself, as an apologist for the Broadening Church:

With the widening acceptance of Biblical criticism, Protestants were even becoming ready to acknowledge a larger role for the Church's authority in theology, ready at least to give increasing weight to the common "consensus" of Christians. . . . [The] Presbyterian Church is now depending on its group mind rather than on traditional Presbyterian authoritarianism for the preservation of its theological heritage.<sup>55</sup>

Could there be any clearer admission that the principle of authority in the Church had become radically different?

Along with this fundamental change there went the increasing centralization of ecclesiastical power which always accompanies it; for wherever the authority of the Christ of the Scriptures is dethroned, there is only the authority of the church organization to take its place. Loetscher admits as much when he says:

. . . the Presbyterian Church was forced in order to preserve its unity, to decentralize control over the theological belief of its ministers and candidates for the ministry. The problem of power and freedom has thus been solved [?] to date by simultaneously increasing administrative centralization and decreasing theological centralization; increasing physical power while at the same time anxiously seeking to prevent

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54. Rian, 187, 189. For details of Machen's trial and of the criticism which it evoked from men, some of which were hardly sympathetic to his basic position, see Rian, 168 ff., and Stonehouse, 489 ff. Machen was tried on the following formal charges: 'With the violation of his ordination vows; with his disapproval of the government and discipline of the Presbyterian Church; with renouncing and disobeying the rules and lawful authority of the Church; with advocating rebellious defiance against the lawful authority of the Church; with refusal to sever his connection with "the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions" as directed by the General Assembly; with not being zealous and faithful in maintaining the peace of the church; with contempt of and rebellion against his superiors in the church in their lawful counsels, commands and corrections; with breach of his lawful promise; with refusing subjection to his brethren in the Lord' (*ibid.*, 489).

55. *BC*, 94, 135.

its trespassing on the realm of the spirit [?]. This was also a concession to the pluralistic character of modern culture.<sup>56</sup>

The separatist would also point to the attitude of a man like McCormick Seminary Professor Andrew C. Zenos toward the doctrinal confession of the Church: No hard and fast interpretation of any doctrinal standard can be applied anywhere; interpretation must be made in each generation by that generation itself according to 'the prevailing corporate mind.' 'Scripture never gives doctrine in inflexible expressions, but leaves the Christian mind to cast and mould it in the forms which will best convey the thought for the purpose.' Christian doctrine is thus ever in a state of flux; it is only a practical means to a personal end. It is to assimilate the scientific, political, and philosophical doctrines of the day, not correct them. 'The Church's mission is not to correct the philosophies that arise in the world nor to controvert them, but to carry the message of God's love to dying men.' However, this love has nothing to do with the historical Gospel. 'Historical matters are never in themselves subjects of doctrinal deliverance.'<sup>57</sup>

This was Zenos, the prosecutor of J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., speaking in 1937 as one of the foremost representatives of the prevailing sentiment in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. On the basis of this outlook the Broadening Church in separatist eyes is in principle an ever-broadening church which will eventually include everything and anything except that which savors of any kind of fundamentalism. As H. McAllister Griffiths once put it, the modernists were living in 'another mental universe.'<sup>58</sup>

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56. *BC*, 93. Of course, the separatist would not completely agree with Loetscher's version of the matter.

57. A. C. Zenos, *Presbyterianism in America*, 1937, 94, 100, 163, 208-211, 93, *et al.* In connection with the issues raised by Zenos, see H. M. Griffiths, *The Case for Compromise*, n.d., 20 f. This booklet, reprinted from articles in the *Christian Beacon*, examines the case for staying in the Church. It is in many ways the great apology of the Presbyterian Separatist Movement. Griffiths himself later lost the confidence of the movement and was repudiated by it.

58. *The Case for Compromise*, 20.  
*History Behind the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod*, pp. 194-243.

Finally, the separatist would point to the history of the U.S.A. Presbyterian Church since 1936. Rian's words in 1940 might well be the refrain of each passing year: 'As each year passes the Church becomes less doctrinally conscious and more in tune with the Modernism of the day!'<sup>59</sup> Loetscher makes the point that the Presbyterian Church has had since 1936 its longest period of theological peace since 1869.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, there has been no doctrinal conflict in the Church since 1936 except for the few mild repercussions created by the new Confession of 1967—and 'no wonder!', exclaims the separatist. Nobody seems to believe in doctrine, in the historic Christian sense of the term, to fight about. This fact has been evidenced by the Church's continuing leadership in the ecumenical movement. It may not be long before the Presbyterian Church will be no longer 'Presbyterian' in name as well as in fact, nor before the ecumenical church to which it belongs will be broad enough to include any and all religions whatever.

As to the hopelessness of reforming such a church from within, Clarence E. Macartney more or less admitted such at least as early as 1939 when he stated that he was beginning to value less the 'whole ecclesiastical structure,' and to feel more and more that a true witness to the Gospel depends on the individual local church, the individual minister, and the individual Christian.<sup>61</sup> What more pointed admission of defeat could be made by a *Presbyterian* minister?

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59. Rian, 207. These words came from a separatist who later repented and rejoined the Broadening Church! Loetscher would appeal to neo-orthodoxy as overcoming, by means of its powerful dialectic, the 'sterile dichotomy' between fundamentalism and liberalism. (*BD*, 34, 92. Cf. L. A. Loetscher, *A Brief History of the Presbyterians*, 1958, 94. For traces of neo-orthodoxy in Loetscher's own thinking, see *BC*, 1, 3, 20 *et al.*). But neo-orthodoxy has not forsaken the modernistic principle, whether in its view of the nature of the Bible or of Christian doctrine and ethics. It is still imbued with the irrationalistic, anti-intellectual, pragmatic approach to Christianity, as its 'credal' expression in the Confession of 1967 abundantly testifies. Cf. *Book of Confessions* (9.01-9.56), 1967. See C. Van Til, *The Confession of 1967: Its Theological Background and Ecumenical Significance*, 1967; and *The New Modernism*, 1946.

60. *BC*, 155. Loetscher wrote this in 1954, a decade or so before the discussions on the new Confession of 1967. Cf. E. A. Smith, *The Presbyterian Ministry in American Culture*, 1962, 264.

61. Rian, 273 f.

Given the refusal of the U.S.A. Presbyterian Church to reform itself, it was the purpose of the Presbyterian Separatist Movement to found a true Presbyterian Church. Thus on June 11, 1936, a company of ministers and ruling elders constituted themselves the first General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of America to continue the 'true spiritual succession of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.' They solemnly pledged to uphold the Scriptures as the Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice; the Westminster Standards as the system of doctrine taught in the Scriptures; and Presbyterian principles of church government as founded upon, and agreeable to, the Word of God.<sup>62</sup>

'We became members, at last, of a true Presbyterian Church,' exclaimed Machen in the *Guardian*. He went on to speak of how the long years of struggle seemed to be nothing compared with the peace and joy of at last being at rest in a true church with a clear conscience. 'We have not escaped in the warmth and joy without making an earnest effort to bring about a reform of the church organization in which we formerly stood.' The effort for reform had been far from perfect. There were 'many terrible sins' to be confessed in the course of the long struggle, such as the failure to bring the Auburn Affirmationists to trial in 1924. At any rate, separation had not taken place until it had become abundantly clear that it was not God's will that the old Church should be reformed. However, now the future holds bright hopes for the little group known as the Presbyterian Church of America. 'At last true evangelism can go forward without the shackle of compromising associations,' and the Lord is able to save by many or by few!<sup>63</sup>

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62. *Minutes of the First General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of America*, 3 f. Cf. Rian, 328 f.; Stonehouse, 500 f.

63. [PG, June 22, 1936, 110](#). For a scathing critique of Machen's position and action, see the unfortunate book of E. J. Carnell, *The Case for Orthodox Theology*, 1961, 114 ff., e.g., 115: 'Machen became so fixed on the evil of modernism that he did not see the evil of anarchy. This fixation prompted him to follow a course that eventually offended the older and wiser Presbyterians. These

Machen's vision was shared by a small group of young men who had been trained at Westminster Seminary. As one of them reminisced many years later: 'We went, some of us, to our local churches, working in store fronts and in houses against the great odds which were now upon us, being labelled with every kind of name.' He also recalled the exhilaration of June 11, 1936: 'It was like standing upon a tower. There was a great vista before us. I felt as though I was part of church history and in my bones were some of the great convictions of the Reformers and of the early Christians.'<sup>64</sup> However, the history of the Presbyterian Church of America was to be stormy, short, and sad. Two groups were to emerge within it, each with a somewhat different vision of what a true Presbyterian Church should be.

As already noted, the Presbyterian Church of America was organized in June of 1936 to hold forth to an unbelieving world the Bible as the Word of God, Reformed doctrine as the teaching of the Word, and Presbyterian principles of church government. For this reason the First General Assembly appointed a committee to prepare for the adoption, at the Second General Assembly to be held in November, of the Westminster Standards and a Presbyterian Form of Government along the lines of the 1934 Constitution of the old organization. The only changes in the Confession which the

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men knew that nothing constructive would be gained by defying the courts of the church. Perhaps the General Assembly had made a mistake; but until the action was reversed by due process of law, obedience was required. No individual Presbyterian can appeal from the General Assembly to the Constitution, and to think he can is cultic.'

64. R. W. Gray, 'Where Have We Been and Where Are We Going?,' *Reformed Presbyterian Reporter*, 99:6 (June, 1965), 9. Cf. Gray's summary of the attitude of these young men with respect to ecclesiastical, cultural, and doctrinal compromise: 'We were standing for the purity of the visible church. . . . We believed that Christianity was not only a fire escape from hell, so to speak, but a life-and-world view. . . . Many of us had come out of fundamentalism which united on five brief doctrines. We thanked God for that fundamentalism which stood in the gap and really brought us to a knowledge of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. But when we were introduced to the Westminster standards, those documents which set forth the system of truth taught in the Word of God, we found something that satisfied our soul in depth. (10).

committee was empowered to recommend concerned the elimination of the amendments and declaratory statements of 1903.<sup>65</sup>

Dr. Machen and the faculty of Westminster Seminary had for some time been concerned about the constitutional nature of the new church. It was their fear that there were certain fundamentalists in the Presbyterian Separatist Movement who were neither strictly Reformed in doctrine nor strictly Presbyterian in practice. These men needed to be brought to see the necessity of a full-fledged commitment to the Reformed Faith. As early as November of 1935, Machen warned against the 'great danger' of forgetting the second ordination vow in one's zeal for the first. For the Presbyterian is pledged to defend not only the Bible against modernism but the Calvinistic interpretation of the Bible against all others. His appeal was: 'Let us not abandon, in the interests of any vague interdenominationalism or antidenominationalism, that great system of revealed truth which is taught in holy Scripture and is so gloriously summarized in the standards of our Church.'<sup>66</sup>

After separation from the old organization, the *Presbyterian Guardian* began to step up this emphasis. In July Machen wrote a column on the Christian Reformed Church, stressing the necessity of having a truly Reformed church. In September, he wrote in his editorial in italicized type: '*We withdrew from the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. in order that we might continue to be Presbyterian.*'<sup>67</sup> The stress was on a true Presbyterian Church guaranteed by a strict constitutionalism.

In this general connection, Professor John Murray had written a series of articles in the *Guardian* entitled 'The Reformed Faith and Modern Substitutes.' The first article dealt with modernism, but the second made clear that mod-

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65. *Minutes*, 3, 4, 7. Cf. Rian, 329.

66. *PG*, Nov. 18, 1935, 54; Dec. 2, 1935, 70.

67. *PG*, July 20, 1936, 170; Sept. 26, 1936, 245 f. [i.e., p. 245 and p. 246]

ernism was not the only menace; there were also Arminianism and ‘Modern Dispensationalism,’ both of which contradict the standards of the Reformed Faith. By ‘Modern Dispensationalism’ Murray meant the view found in parts of the Scofield Bible which, in teaching that God has two programs in dealing with fallen mankind, that of law and that of grace, undermines the unity of the covenant of grace.

The ‘Dispensationalism’ of which we speak as heterodox from the standpoint of the Reformed Faith is that form of interpretation, widely popular at the present time, which discovers in the several dispensations of God’s redemptive revelation distinct and even contrary principles of divine procedure and thus destroys the unity of God’s dealings with fallen mankind.

Although the dispensationalist when pressed would deny it, he is forced by the logic of his own position to say that if any were saved in the Mosaic dispensation, they were saved by the works of the law.<sup>68</sup>

There were those in the Church who were taking this series as an attack on premillennialism. However, the editor of the *Guardian*, McAllister Griffiths, himself a premillennialist, tried to make emphatically clear that the articles were not to be interpreted as an effort to read premillennialists out of the church, for Presbyterians believe in ‘eschatological freedom’ to hold various views about the second coming of Christ.<sup>69</sup>

In September R. B. Kuiper, of the Westminster faculty and the Christian Reformed Church, wrote concerning the examination of ministerial candidates in the Presbyterian Church of America:

It would have warmed the cockles of the heart of any Christian Reformed minister to hear how closely they were questioned about the two errors which are so extremely prevalent, Arminianism and the Dispensationalism of the Scofield Bible. The Assembly wanted to make sure that those prospective ministers were not tainted with such anti-reformed heresies. . . . The Presbyterian Church of America is not just another fundamentalist church. Its basis is strictly Reformed.<sup>70</sup>

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68. *PG*, Dec. 16, 1935, 88 f.; Feb. 3, 1936, 142 f.; May 18, 1936, 77-79.

69. *PG*, May 4, 1936, 44, 52.

70. *PG*, [Sept. 12, 1936, 227](#).

Since early in 1936, the Rev. Carl McIntire of Collingswood, New Jersey had been publishing the *Christian Beacon*. In October there appeared an editorial entitled 'Premillennialism,' in which McIntire maintains that Kuiper's reference to the dispensationalism of the Scofield Bible is an attack upon the premillennialists as heretics.<sup>71</sup> Kuiper replied in a letter in which he expresses the wish that the editor of the *Beacon* had requested a personal interview before rushing into print. Kuiper's remark had been misunderstood. For it is clear that the dispensationalism of the Scofield Bible, with its heretical organizing principle, is ever so much more than 'the mere teaching of Premillennialism.' Modern dispensationalism is one thing, historic premillennialism quite another. However, McIntire, despite Machen's requests, refused to print Kuiper's letter.<sup>72</sup>

Dr. Machen deplored the fact that 'misrepresentation and consequent suspicion' were endangering the Church, and attempted to correct it. He was alarmed by the editorial position and practices of the *Beacon*. He was opposed to anyone's being an officer of the Presbyterian Church of America who accepted *all* the teaching of Scofield's notes. At the same time, he defended the rights of the premillennialists in the Church. The Presbytery of California had overtured the Second General Assembly requesting that 'definite, emphatic, and unambiguous eschatological liberty' be written into the constitution of the Church. Machen opposed this on the ground that such freedom already existed. As the Assembly approached, he was also jealous that the Church adopt the Westminster Standards in their purity, without the 1903 amendments.<sup>73</sup>

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71. *Christian Beacon (CB)*, Oct. 1, 1936, 4.

72. The *Beacon* editorial and Kuiper's letter, along with Machen's views, may be found in *PG*, Nov. 14, 1937.

73. *Ibid.*, 41-45, 55. To Machen the Scofield view that the Lord's Prayer is 'on legal ground' was 'heresy of a very terrible kind.' He wrote: 'Rather than that the Presbyterian Church of America should knowingly tolerate such heresy in its ministry or eldership or diaconate, it would surely seem better that it should be divided or dissolved.'

The Second General Assembly witnessed the adoption of the Westminster Standards without the bulk of the 1903 amendments. This action was opposed by McIntire in particular. He admitted that the 1903 amendments were ‘weak,’ but maintained that the creed of the old Church should be retained in order to strengthen the civil case for the retention of church property. The Assembly also saw the defeat of the overtures for eschatological freedom.<sup>74</sup>

Dr. Machen was pleased with the Assembly in general. True, there was a minority who were overzealous in their zeal to be democratic and avoid centralization of power. ‘In their reaction against letting a “machine” do everything, it did seem as though they were inclined to be unwilling to let anybody do anything.’ However, such was not the attitude of the majority, and the faults of the Assembly were in general ‘youthful faults.’<sup>75</sup>

Within a few months, however, the minority had become the Bible Presbyterian Synod.

### **The Division of 1937<sup>76</sup>**

As intimated in Machen’s remarks the minority were not happy with the way things were going. Their attitude was expressed by Carl McIntire in the *Beacon* when he described the characteristics of the unpresbyterian ‘machine’ in the old organization, which should never be allowed to develop in the Presbyterian Church of America:

A little group of men set themselves up to rule the Church. They have themselves elected to positions of influence in the Church and work very closely one with another. They proceed to tell men in the

74. Concerning the issue of the 1903 amendments see *PG*, Nov. 28, 1936, 82; cf. *CB*, Mar. 10, 1955, 2. Concerning the eschatology issue, see the protest of Milo F. Jamison of the California Presbytery in the same *PG*, 85. For a general account of these developments from the majority viewpoint, see Rian, 234-238. Cf. also the brief account by Stonehouse, 503 ff.

75. *Ibid.*, 71; cf. 79.

76. For an excellent treatment of this topic, the reader is referred to a series of articles by G. M. Marsden entitled ‘Perspectives on the Division of 1937’ in *PG*, Jan.-April, 1964. These articles are both well-documented and provocative.

Church what they must do, when and how. ... By the use of patronage they curry the favor of men. By threats or intimidation they put fear in the hearts of men. They develop a complex in which they feel that their actions are right and that everyone who differs from them should not be in the Church. They have a feeling that they must rule or ruin.<sup>77</sup>

Reminiscing many years later, J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., put it this way:

In the case of the great Dr. Machen, there was a tendency on the part of his followers to regard him as a prelate (preferred) and to regard any disagreement with him of any kind whatsoever as a personal attack upon a God-given leader, and thus an attack upon the cause itself. At the last, I had some very sad experiences with Dr. Machen which I should never publicize except that I believe that we have a lesson to learn from them. A young man by the name of Carl McIntire had shown remarkable ability and initiative. He had succeeded in popularizing a paper which ably handled the important issues which confronted us all. By letter and by personal conference I vigorously defended the right of Carl McIntire to publish his own paper in his own way. Finally Dr. Machen said to me, 'I had thought that it would be possible for you and me to belong to the same church, but now I see that it is impossible.' And he invited me to leave the Church!<sup>78</sup>

Toward the end of 1936 Buswell wrote Machen a long letter outlining criticisms of Westminster Seminary ranging from its view of apologetics to its attitude toward 'the separated life.'<sup>79</sup> However, by January 1, 1937, Machen was dead, and the leadership of the Westminster group had fallen into new hands.

Apart from the usual conflict of personalities, the issues between the two groups are to be found in three major areas: church doctrine, ethics, and government. The first involves the attitude of Westminster Seminary toward dispensationalism and premillennialism; the second, the attitude of the

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77. *CB*, Nov. 5, 1936, 4.

78. *Bible Press*, July 22, 1955, 10. This comment was penned in the midst of the Bible Presbyterian controversy of 1955, and Dr. Buswell is intimating that Carl McIntire in 1955 is demonstrating toward others the attitude that Machen took toward McIntire and Buswell in 1936.

79. Stonehouse, 504. A copy of this crucial letter is no doubt among the Machen Papers in the library of Westminster Theological Seminary. But although permission may now be obtained to look at these papers, we have not had opportunity to do so.

Church toward the application of Biblical authority to the Christian life; and the third, the attitude of the Independent Board of Presbyterian Foreign Missions toward independency. These issues will be considered in this order because this is the order in which they arose in the Church, although it should be pointed out that this discussion does not strictly follow the chronological sequence of events.

First, then, there is the *doctrinal* issue. In November of 1936 the *Presbyterian Guardian* had published an article by Buswell entitled 'A Premillennialist's View.' Dr. Buswell was glad for the liberty to state his views in the *Guardian*, although he was jealous to limit the term 'eschatological liberty' to the millennial question. Also, the term 'dispensationalism' must not be confused with the 'various dispensations' of the covenant of grace mentioned in the Confession of Faith (VII, vi), or with the doctrine of a millennial dispensation after the return of Christ. Buswell emphatically endorses the teaching of the Confession as to the essential unity of the covenant of grace, and believes that there is no one in the Presbyterian Church of America who really denies the unity of God's redemptive plan. Also his own personal views are 'extremely opposed to what is commonly called dispensationalism.' He also feels that the system of doctrine underlying the Scofield Bible does not deny the unity of the covenant of grace. It does teach that the Mosaic dispensation was fundamentally legalistic. This teaching is to be rejected, but those who hold it are not necessarily heretical. For the great majority of them teach the underlying unity of God's dealing with man in terms of grace, so that no one ever was or could be saved except by faith. 'It is heretical to teach that the covenant of grace was broken off between Sinai and Calvary. It is not heretical, strongly as we may disagree with the teaching, to hold that between Sinai and Calvary there was superimposed over the covenant of grace a legalistic system of hypothetical but impossible salvation by works.' Finally, Buswell goes on record as being opposed to dispensational-

ism's view that the moral law is more binding in the Old Testament than in the New, in that this opens the way to antinomianism.<sup>80</sup>

Buswell's *Unfulfilled Prophecies*, in which he set forth his eschatological views, appeared early in 1937. The book interestingly contains an appendix note by Professor Allan A. MacRae of Westminster who argues, with an appeal to such renowned European scholars as Henry Alford and Theodor Zahn, that to maintain that the premillennial interpretation of Revelation 20 is unscholarly is ridiculous. 'If a man does not wish to accept the teaching of Revelation, Chapter 20, that is one thing. But to regard the premillennial interpretation of it as unscholarly is utterly impossible, in view of the unquestioned standing of the authorities quoted' [*i.e.*, Alford and Zahn].<sup>81</sup>

The book was reviewed in the *Guardian* by John Murray in an article entitled 'Dr. Buswell's Premillennialism.' Murray is appreciative of the degree of saneness there is in Buswell's position, and of certain aspects of Buswell's work, but he is unusually critical of the methods by which he tries to establish his thesis. Buswell is accused of grossly misrepresenting both B. B. Warfield and Geerhardus Vos. He is guilty of 'pitiable distortion and misrepresentation,' which, though not necessarily deliberate distortion, demonstrates that he is 'seriously incompetent' to deal carefully and fairly with an opponent. His work is a very unscholarly presentation of the premillennial view and thus exceedingly disappointing.<sup>82</sup>

In late April Professor MacRae resigned from the faculty of Westminster Seminary in a rather spectacular way. He

80. *PG*, Nov. 14, 1936, 46 f.

81. J. O. Buswell, *Unfulfilled Prophecies*, 1937, 95. For MacRae's concise statement of the premillennial position, see his well-known sermon which aroused the ire of the Westminster faculty: A. A. MacRae, *The Millennial Kingdom of Christ*, n.d. In this sermon MacRae maintains that postmillennialism and amillennialism introduce a method of Biblical interpretation which is 'utterly destructive.'

82. *PG*, Feb. 27, 1937, 206-209. See the succeeding exchange of criticism in *PG*, April 10, 1937, 12-16, in which Murray tries to make clear that he was not indulging in a personal attack, but setting forth a scientific evaluation.

charged that control of the faculty had passed into the hands of ‘a small alien group without American Presbyterian background.’ The charge continues:

This group shows little desire to perpetuate the noble traditions which were once characteristic of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. It was a great Church, truly Reformed, but not at variance with the main stream of Evangelical Christianity. This alien group to which I have referred considers no one to be truly Presbyterian unless he agrees with them in everything which they choose to call essential to being ‘Reformed’—much of which is derived from their own non-Presbyterian background. They have evidenced an inflexible determination to enforce their own peculiar notions by crushing the broad evangelical point of view which in its earlier years made the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. a great Reformed Church, and not a mere sect. All this is far from the real purpose for which the Seminary was founded. The major emphasis of the Seminary, formerly directed against Modernism with such telling results, has now been shifted so that it is no longer primarily against Modernism, but against Fundamentalism, so-called.

Despite protesting to the contrary, the seminary is militantly hostile to premillennialism, and will not allow an equally militant defense of it in the seminary curriculum. Furthermore, according to MacRae, a straw man called ‘Modern Dispensationalism’ has been set up, to which is attributed teaching which most, if not all, of those who call themselves dispensationalists would deny. Finally, the faculty is on a vigorous campaign to maintain one’s right to use intoxicating beverages, an emphasis which, regardless of one’s abstract rights in this area, is contrary to the Bible which consistently warns against strong drink.<sup>83</sup>

There was in MacRae’s mind, and in the minds of almost all of the other premillennialists in the Presbyterian Church of America, a definite connection between the millennial issue and the Christian life. As expressed in his well-known

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83. [PC, May 15, 1937, 50](#). MacRae’s letter of resignation is here reprinted in full. The reference to the Westminster faculty’s lack of appreciation for American Presbyterianism is an appeal to the fact that Professors Van Til, Kuiper, and Stonehouse were from the Christian Reformed Church; and Professor Murray from the Scottish Presbyterian tradition. Of these only Stonehouse was a charter member of the Presbyterian Church of America. The others did not join until later, after the controversy had arisen.

sermon on *The Millennial Kingdom of Christ*, MacRae claimed:

My purpose in presenting this subject has not been controversial. I have no desire to promote divisions regarding these matters. But I cannot keep silent where God has spoken clearly in His Word. God has given us this great hope for a purpose. How sad if we neglect the gift that He has given. The teaching of the Scripture regarding the premillennial return of Christ to establish His kingdom of universal righteousness on earth has furnished constant inspiration to godly Christian living. There is something in this doctrine which results in increased purity of life and in increased zeal for service. All the great evangelists of recent years—I believe without a single exception—have been strongly moved by this great hope. It has occupied a prominent place in the thought of every great missionary leader of recent years. The Church can never fulfill its destiny if it fails to give this doctrine the place in its life that God has intended.<sup>84</sup>

We are thus introduced to the *ethical* issue as to whether the beverage use of alcohol should be part of the Christian life. As early as September of 1936 Carl McIntire had inquired into the wisdom of Westminster Seminary's not having any regulations against the use of alcohol on the part of its students. He felt that all consistently Christian institutions should take a strong official stand on the liquor question. The Registrar, Mr. Paul Woolley, replied that he felt that the Bible left it up to each individual Christian to decide when he was being a stumbling-block to his brother.<sup>85</sup>

In October R. Laird Harris expressed his views in the *Guardian's* Sunday School Lesson: The beverage use of alcohol cannot be in itself sinful, for Christ drank wine. However,

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84. MacRae, *op. cit.* For the response of the Westminster Seminary faculty and a part of the student body to MacRae's resignation, see Rian, 302-305. The statement by the students declares that it was unanimously approved at a called meeting of the student body. That there were those students who—like Francis A. Schaeffer, G. Douglas Young, and John M. L. Young—were sympathetic to MacRae, goes without saying. Why the statement went unchallenged by them is an interesting question. In early May four seminary trustees resigned in sympathy with MacRae—R. T. Brumbaugh, H. S. Laird, R. K. Armes, and F. M. Paist (Rian, 102).

85. *CB*, June 24, 1937, 2, 7. In June of 1937, the seminary faculty finally did prohibit the beverage use of alcohol on its campus lest the Christian public get a wrong impression of life at the school. But they refused to take a stand against the beverage use of alcohol altogether.

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the question, in our present society, is not one of morality, but one of expediency or advisability. 'Although moderate drinking in decent circumstances cannot be denominated sin, still the part of wisdom and expediency for the Christian may well be to stand off from a hellish trade. Whatever rights a Christian may possess, his exercise of his liberties must always be controlled by love for his brother.'<sup>86</sup>

In early 1937 Dr. Buswell's book on *The Christian Life* appeared. The early part of the book deals with the dispensational question in order to establish the authority of the moral law in the Christian life. It then proceeds to combat the view that the Bible does not teach us anything concerning specific matters of conduct, in that the general principles of the moral law are applied to specific ethical situations in the Bible itself. 'The Bible presents a system of teaching for faith and life dealing with fundamental principles which may be applied in various ways as to detail. . . . The Bible does not give us explicit details in regard to all important matters of conduct, but the Bible does give us fundamental principles which we must, as guided by the Holy Spirit, apply to the details of life as changing circumstances arise.' After all, does not the Confession of Faith (I, vi) teach as much?

On the basis of this view of the nature of Biblical authority, certain 'worldly amusements,' such as the modern dance, are, by way of application, condemned as unscriptural. With respect to strong drink, 'it may be conceded that the Bible does not explicitly teach total abstinence.' In the settled civilization of Palestine, where the customs of the people were relatively stable, the moderate use of alcohol was no doubt acceptable, at least for reasons of health (I Tim. 5:23). However, we live in 'a speed-machine world' where there are no well-established social inhibitions. Conditions have changed

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86. *PC*, Oct. 24, 1936, 33 f. At this time Harris was a recent graduate of Westminster Seminary. His later, and somewhat stricter, views on the alcohol question are expressed in 'The Bible and Wine,' *Bible Today* (March, 1944), 131-139. [Vol. 38, no. 6; alternate title: "Wine and Strong Drink"]

so that, even if the Lord drank alcoholic wine, we cannot suppose that he would use or approve of alcoholic beverages in America today. 'Alcohol in the modern world is a different problem from alcohol in the ancient world.' In the modern world young people are led into drunkenness by the thousands through moderate drinking. Those who, in the light of this situation, would vindicate their Christian liberties on Calvinistic grounds would do well to read Calvin and the Westminster Catechisms on the Ten Commandments.<sup>87</sup>

In the February 27 issue of the *Guardian*, the same issue which carried Murray's criticisms of Buswell's book on eschatology, Professor Ned B. Stonehouse challenged his views on the Christian life with an editorial entitled 'Godliness and Christian Liberty.' Those who advocate 'the separated life' in terms of total abstinence from tobacco and wine are more in the historic tradition of Methodism than of Presbyterianism. 'Among Presbyterians, even where there has been a strong inclination, for one reason or another to the practice of total abstinence, commonly there has been a free recognition of the rights of other Christians to the dictates of their own consciences in matters where the Bible has not pronounced judgment.'

Also, those who plead for the so-called separated life err

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87. J. O. Buswell, Jr., *The Christian Life*, 1937, 60, 68, 81, 77, 85-88. The relevant Catechism Questions are WLC QQ. 91-152 and WSC QQ. 39-84. The WCF (I, vi) reads as follows: 'The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit or traditions of men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word: and there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.' Buswell would stress the words 'by good and necessary consequence deduced from Scripture;' the Westminster men, that which immediately follows, namely, 'unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit or traditions of men.' For McIntire's restatement of Buswell's argument plus his own approach, see *CB*, April 29, 1937, 4, *et al.*

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seriously in their understanding and application of the Bible, our only standard of appeal. They do not appreciate the doctrine of Christian liberty. 'If God alone is Lord of the conscience, it is a matter of grave consequence for any one to judge a brother in a matter where the Scriptures give liberty either expressly or through silence.' We must not go 'beyond the things which are written' (I. Cor. 4:6). Moreover, the main objection to 'the separated life,' defined as refraining from a few 'worldly practices' is not that it sets too high a standard, but that it falls far short of the Biblical standard of complete devotion.

Regarding the use of wine, the Bible nowhere teaches us to refrain from the use of wine, and the Bible was written in a day when men were as prone to excess as today! It is therefore a serious reflection on Christ to hold that moderate drinking inevitably leads to drunkenness, as Buswell seems to do. Stonehouse continues:

Let no one conclude that we hold a brief for the modern liquor traffic, or that we have a light view of drunkenness. Nor are we concerned to encourage any one to drink wine to vindicate his Christian liberty. Nor are we arguing against abstinence, if any one prefers abstinence. It is quite possible too that some individuals may have to abstain entirely if they are easily led to excess. Our times certainly call for serious warning, as the Bible seriously warns, against the perils of drinking. On the other hand, we cannot express too emphatically our deep concern to oppose the judgment that it is a sin under every condition today for Christians to drink wine moderately. As we are zealous to guard the honor of our Lord, we cannot fail to oppose any judgment of the use of wine which would make our Savior responsible for leading men into a life of sin.

With respect to the argument from inexpediency, or inadvisability, there are those babes in Christ who have not yet come to appreciate their liberty in him. However, the Bible does not *in every instance* call upon Christians to sacrifice their rights in dealing with weaker brethren. It is true that *in some circumstances* they must do so, but, on the other hand:

Since expediency can be appealed to only with respect to matters

with regard to which the Bible permits liberty of choice, there can be no law of expediency. That is to say, no general rule can be established as to what love for one's brother may determine as wise and edifying. In the absence of a divine commandment, the responsibility for the use which a Christian makes of his rights belongs not to the church nor to any other person but only to himself. Otherwise, love for one's neighbor loses its essential character through the introduction of the element of compulsion.<sup>88</sup>

Finally, there is the *church government* issue. Back in November of 1936 a majority of the Independent Board of Presbyterian Foreign Missions managed to prevent the re-election of Machen as president. They were unhappy with the fact that both Westminster Seminary and the Church were controlled by the same small group of men, and were determined that such would not be the case with the Independent Board. Harold S. Laird was elected president, and Merrill T. MacPherson vice-president. Both were at the time pastors of independent churches.<sup>89</sup>

With the death of Machen the Westminster group became a minority on the executive committee of the Board as well as on the Board itself. They were particularly worried about the doctrinal position of MacPherson, whose ardent premillennialism seemed based on a dispensationalism contrary to the Reformed Faith. They were afraid that the leadership of the Independent Board would institute new policies, such as taking an official stand for premillennialism or total abstinence from intoxicating beverages. However, they chose to challenge the majority on the issue of independency, thus injecting a new issue into the controversy.<sup>90</sup>

When the Board met on May 31, 1937, to examine

88. *PG*, Feb. 27, 1937, 201-204. *Cf. PG*, April 10, 1937, 12, where Buswell contends that his argument is based squarely on the scriptural doctrine of inexpediency (I Cor. 6:12; 10:23), while Stonehouse maintains that it goes beyond an appeal to inexpediency. For a brief account in sympathy with Stonehouse, see Rian, 238 ff.

89. Marsden, *op. cit.*, 29; *cf. PG*, Nov. 28, 1936, 91. *Cf. Rian*, 240 f. Dr. Buswell has since apologized for his part in this action. See his letter in *RP Letter Exchange* (Mimeographed), 1969.

90. *Ibid.*, 45. *Cf. PG*, May 15, 1937, 39.

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prospective missionary candidates, a division arose as to whether the candidates should be questioned regarding the beverage use of alcohol. Finally, after considerable debate as to the form of the question, they were asked whether it was their intention, within the scope of their Christian liberty, to abstain wholly from the beverage use of intoxicating liquors. When all but one answered that such was not their intention, the majority of the Board decided to defer their appointment for six months in view of their confused state of mind and the serious division within the Board.<sup>91</sup>

At this point the minority presented the Board with a resolution to reaffirm its loyalty to its charter, reject the independent form of church government, and force its members to bring their practice immediately into accord with their pledge to uphold Presbyterian principles, or else resign from the Board. When this resolution was tabled, the Westminster group, including Professors Woolley and Stonehouse, resigned on the ground that the Board was unfaithful to its charter. The General Secretary, Charles J. Woodbridge, also resigned on the same ground. Their desire was to create a new denominational board which, from their point of view, would enable the Church to carry out its missionary responsibilities.<sup>92</sup>

The Board argued that it was loyal to its charter as proved by the fact that all of its members were Presbyterians. It charged that the minority's resolution was an excuse to disrupt the work of the Board. Dr. Laird maintained that the independents on it were wholeheartedly in favor of Presbyterian doctrine and government, and were only independents because they were not in the position to join any existing Presbyterian denomination. Moreover, no one had objected in the past that independents by force of circumstance,

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91. This account is that of elder Peter Stam, Jr. Dr. Stam also points out that all of these candidates were from Wheaton College which at that time, due to the influence of President Buswell, supplied some one-third of the Westminster Seminary student body.

92. Marsden, *op. cit.*, 46. Cf. *PC*, June 12, 1937, 71, 79 f; Rian, 333-335, 242.

rather than conviction, could not sincerely take the pledge to uphold the charter. On the other hand, the Westminster group could point to the constitution of MacPherson's church which explicitly and finally renounced the authority of any ecclesiastical jurisdiction whatever.<sup>93</sup>

In review, it is not likely that the issue of independency would have arisen had it not been for the other issues in the minds of the Westminster men, namely dispensationalism and total abstinence. Nevertheless, the struggle for control of the Independent Board was crucial to the division of the Presbyterian Church of America. With it the Division of 1937 was all but complete.

As the Third General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of America approached, both sides were in the mood to demand a show-down, particularly on the liquor issue. Carl McIntire, writing in the *Christian Beacon* of the sin involved in drinking, declares: 'The Bible must be our only infallible rule in faith and *practice*.' Ned Stonehouse writes in the *Presbyterian Guardian* against the wisdom of passing resolutions. There must be no falling into the old denomination's government by resolutions rather than government by the constitution. Moreover, the Church must take pains to remain within its proper sphere. 'Secular affairs and political questions certainly are not the concern of the church.' Above all, the Church must not *in any detail* go beyond the teaching of the Bible in the sphere of doctrine and morals. For it is as much a sin to add to the Word of God as to take away from it.<sup>94</sup>

In short, when the General Assembly met in early June, it was controlled by Westminster men, that is, by those loyal to the opinion of the seminary faculty. The Assembly refused to sanction the Independent Board, on the ground that it was unfaithful to its Presbyterian charter, and set up its own committee on foreign missions by a vote of 75-19. Dr.

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93. *Idem*. Cf. Rian, 241 f. There was also much doubt as to MacPherson's belief in infant baptism.

94. *CB*, May 27, 1937, 4. [PG, May 29, 1937, 54.](#)

Buswell maintained in the course of the debate that the real issue was not Presbyterianism over against independency; but a ‘little clique’ that wanted to run everything, and total abstinence.

With respect to the latter issue, Buswell had already, before the Assembly, informed the Philadelphia papers that the Presbyterian Church of America was a ‘wet’ church.<sup>95</sup> It seems that he had made known from the start his intention to leave the Church if the Assembly did not approve the overture of the Chicago area presbytery on total abstinence. This overture requested that the Church declare its adherence to the historic American Presbyterian position on the question, namely—in the language of the General Assembly of 1877—that the only true principle of temperance is total abstinence from everything that will intoxicate.<sup>96</sup>

The Assembly rejected this stand in favor of a motion simply repeating sections of the Westminster Standards on the ground that no situation had arisen which would call for any further statement. The following amendment was also rejected by a vote of 45-39:

Notwithstanding the foregoing, we, the members of this Assembly, in the interests of making clear our position on this particular matter, namely, the question of a Christian’s relation to the use of intoxicating beverages, and with no slightest intention of setting ourselves up in judgment on the conscience of any man where the Word of God has not bound him, do desire to declare that we deem it wise to pursue the course of total abstinence: and furthermore, we lament the widespread tendency of the American people toward intemperance, and we are unalterably opposed to the modern saloon and the liquor traffic in general, which, as now carried on, is associated with and leads to sinful abuses, and is subversive of the general welfare of society.

Many among the minority felt that this was the mildest imaginable statement. Carl McIntire could not see how they

95. In the *RP Letter Exchange*, *op. cit.*, Dr. Buswell explains the intention of this remark and regrets having made it in that it was taken in a sense unintended by him.

96. There were two other overtures of similar import, one from the Philadelphia Presbytery, for an account of the debate on these issues from the majority viewpoint, see *PC*, June 26, 1937, 88-96. *Cf.* Rian, 240, 332 f.

could be connected with a church that would not counsel its young people that the wisest thing for them is to leave liquor alone. No legislation had been proposed, just good counsel or 'pious advice.' The Presbyterian Church of America—which later had to change its name to the Orthodox Presbyterian Church—was trying to build a new church, a Christian Reformed Church, not a Presbyterian Church. The minority wanted 'a freer, more aggressive testimony, with the warmth of personal evangelism in it, as well as a careful teaching of the great system of doctrine set forth in the Scriptures.'<sup>97</sup>

### **A Testifying Church**

Thus was the Presbyterian Separatist Movement and the Church spawned by it divided in June of 1937. The one branch became the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and the other the Bible Presbyterian Synod. It must not be supposed that overt ecclesiastical division came all at once. For instance, Bible Presbyterian leader R. Laird Harris did not leave the Presbyterian Church of America until some months after June of 1937; and the Bible Presbyterian Synod was not formally organized as a separate ecclesiastical body until September of 1938, well over a year later.<sup>98</sup> Apparently there was still some hope that reconciliation might be possible. Also, as these hopes dimmed, there were no doubt, as is usual in such situations, those who, given the reality of

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97. *CB*, June 10, 1937, 4; Jan. 10, 1957, 8. Marsden remarks on the mildness of the resolution on alcoholic beverages (*op. cit.*, 55). Cf. McIntire, *The Death of a Church*, 1967, 64: 'The group that wanted a different kind of a church called itself the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and indeed became a new church and has been different.' The Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. initiated legal proceedings against the separatist Church's right to call itself the Presbyterian Church of America. The courts eventually decided the case in favor of the plaintiff Church, and in February of 1939 the Presbyterian Church of America renamed itself the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. For an account of the court case, see Rian, 231-234, 330-332. For the history of the OPC up to the present, see the *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, 1939 ff.; and the *Presbyterian Guardian*, 1939 ff.

98. The story of the establishment of the Bible Presbyterian Synod is reserved for the next chapter.

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ecclesiastical division, were forced to take sides according to their own convictions, although they would have preferred not to do so.

It is obvious from the foregoing account that Carl McIntire and the *Christian Beacon* played a leading role in the division of 1937. At the same time, to make him the primary factor in the development of events would be a gross oversimplification of the facts. In the first place, it makes the mistake of taking for granted that the McIntire of 1937 is precisely the McIntire of later years, although it cannot be denied that indications of his later outlook were evident back then. Secondly, it overlooks the fact that many able and learned men, who have long since repudiated the objectionable dements of the McIntire position, associated themselves with the Bible Presbyterian movement.<sup>99</sup> The question arises as to why this was the case. In other words, why, so soon after the initial separation from the old Church, were they willing to tolerate, if not welcome, another separation? Indeed, why were both parties so willing to permit another ecclesiastical division so soon after the agony of the first?

Whatever other answers may be given to this question, it may be remarked, first of all, that to put the question this way is a step in the direction of answering it. For the very fact that there was so little time between the separation of 1937 and that of 1936 may very well have made the second easier to contemplate than it would have otherwise been under ordinary circumstances. However, the times were extraordinary due to the momentous character of the initial break with the old Church; and once that had taken place, another separation seemed insignificant in comparison. In other

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99. One need only think of J. Oliver Buswell, R. Laird Harris, Peter Stam, Francis A. Schaeffer, G. Douglas Young, John M. L. Young, *etc.* With regard to McIntire, it is profitable to note the comment of Marsden (*op. cit.*, 55): 'It is often observed that subsequent history has indicated that Carl McIntire has never been content in any organization which he did not control, with the implication that it would have been nearly impossible for the majority in the church to continue cooperation with McIntire and his programs.'

words, once the legitimacy of ecclesiastical separation was established, and the principle enthusiastically embraced and applied in unique circumstances, it may very well have been psychologically difficult both to check the separatist tendencies aroused in unusual circumstances on the one hand, and to make the mental shift to more normal circumstances on the other.

Second, the fact that the men contemplating the possibility of a second separation were forced to view it against the background of the first has another important implication, namely that these men may very well have had difficulty seeing the division of 1937 as another *ecclesiastical* separation. Perhaps it was difficult for them to realize that they were in a new *church*. No doubt they continued to think in terms of their involvement in a separatist *movement* animated with the vision of a new church which was at the same time to be 'the true spiritual succession' of the old. However, it seems that in the minds of both parties this church was still in the process of formation; it had hardly come into existence and thus could hardly be split. Both parties saw their constructive work not so much in terms of building together in a new church, but in terms of realizing their own particular vision of what the old church ought to have been. As the foregoing account has revealed, each party had somewhat different conceptions as to what a true Presbyterian Church should be. Each saw the 'true spiritual succession' of the old Church in somewhat different light. While they were agreed in their opposition to the old, they differed, like the Protestant Reformers, in their vision of the new. Cooperation in the positive aspects of reformation, as compared with the negative, is no easier in the twentieth century than in the sixteenth.

This leads us to mention, third, the fact that the issues involved were important to both sides, not only in themselves, perhaps not so much in themselves, but because of the divergent attitudes which, taken together, they were thought to reflect. For instance, the Bible Presbyterians were genuine-

ly convinced that the viewpoint of the Westminster men, whatever their theoretical position, practically precluded the effective witness of a testifying church. It militated against an effective testimony to the second coming of Christ, to a godly, and thus separated life, and to the gospel held in common with other fundamentalist churches. Put another way the 'Reformed' exclusiveness of Westminster had little room for a fervent expectation of the Lord's return as an incentive to a godly life and evangelistic activity. Furthermore, it was thought to preclude the specific application of Scriptural principles in the ministry of the Church, especially its corporate testimony on contemporary issues.

The feeling, then, was that the Westminster Seminary group was unwilling to tolerate criticism of its position within the Church. In their narrowness they wanted, not a spiritual succession of the old church, but a new church which would be controlled by their views on everything. The Westminster men were in general in danger of promoting a dead and deadening orthodoxy without broad evangelical sympathies, and they were, as leaders, suspicious of all criticism as emanating from a fundamentalism which was unlearned in the Reformed Faith. The minority reacted against this outlook. In the words of G. Douglas Young:

One of the causes of the division was the doctrine of eschatology. Another was the question of the use of alcoholic beverages on the part of Christians. A deeper cause existed, however. It was one of attitude. Is it necessary for all to subscribe to the same point of view on every doctrine which a given group considers to be cardinal? Some in 1938 thought it was, others did not. So division came.<sup>100</sup>

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100. *Bible Press*, Sept. 9, 1966, 11. Cf. The comments of R. Laird Harris on the Presbyterian Church of America in the *Evangelical Presbyterian Reporter*, 8:1 {Jan., 1962}, 4: 'But all was not rosy in the infant church. Leaders at Westminster Seminary urged that the new denomination must be doctrinally pure and insisted on holding some debatable points such as double predestination, and in particular, urged a campaign against the dispensationalism of the Scofield Bible. Another point advanced was so-called Christian liberty, *i.e.*, the right to engage in any practice, like drinking in moderation and smoking, which is not expressly forbidden in the Bible. Those not at Westminster reacted, feeling that the law of love in such doubtful practices should rule, and holding that American Presbyterianism

To the Westminster men, on the other hand, the attitude of their critics was sheer foolishness, the product of a flamboyant and unscholarly fanaticism. Behind every word about premillennialism or total abstinence there lurked a militant dispensationalism and a shallow fundamentalism unwelcome in the Presbyterian Church of America. This lack of appreciation for the Reformed Faith as they understood it had weakened the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., and now that a new beginning was possible, it was not going to be allowed to wreck a true Presbyterian Church.

It should be pointed out that the Westminster campaign against dispensationalism, the so-called 'separated life,' and fundamentalism only gained full steam after the formation of the new church organization was considered inevitable. For instance in a March 1937 issue of the *Presbyterian Guardian* we read regarding dispensationalism: 'We cannot offer a very good reason for a failure to raise the issue at an earlier time. Evidently the only reason is that we were absorbed in fighting that great enemy, Modernism.'<sup>101</sup> This campaign, carried on relentlessly with little attempt to understand or bring along those who did not immediately see the light and fall in with it, seemed to display a narrow condescension. On the other hand, the Bible Presbyterians responded with an equally relentless campaign against amillennialism, so called 'Christian liberty,' and 'Reformed' exclusiveness with what appeared to be an equally narrow condescension. In fact, neither party appears to have taken pains to understand the other's mentality and motives, produced in part by the uniqueness of the situation in which both found themselves. Each side seems to have displayed a condescending attitude toward the other.

It should also be pointed out that the Westminster men

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had often testified in favor of total abstinence and against so-called worldly practices.' Note the words 'Those not at Westminster reacted. . . .' Cf. *CB*, Aug. 31, 1939.

101. [PG, Mar. 13, 1937, 217.](#)

were as happy to see the Bible Presbyterians leave the Church as the latter were to leave. Therefore, to see the minority as the schismatic party simply because, happening to be in the minority, they were the ones forced to form a new church organization is hardly a balanced or judicious view of the matter. Had the Westminster group been in the minority, they would have certainly done the same; so that it can be said with justice that each side, by virtue of the attitude adopted, separated itself from the other.<sup>102</sup> However, in fairness to both, it would seem that neither party saw itself as splitting a church but as maintaining the 'true spiritual succession' of the old Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.

Finally, we may see the whole Presbyterian Separatist Movement against the background of the larger history of the old Church. That Church had become unfaithful to its past, both to its Old School and New School traditions. Thus, in fulfillment of Warfield's prophecy, it did not split when the critical moment came in 1936. However, the hoped-for new beginning, the separatist movement, in that it combined these two divergent traditions, did split in 1937. The Old School tradition was reflected in the Westminster men and the New School outlook in the Bible Presbyterians; and despite certain obvious dissimilarities, the division of the Presbyterian Separatist Movement in 1937 in many respects reflects the Old School—New School division of 1837. As long as antipathy to modernism was the primary concern, the two were able to cooperate in opposition to it. However, as soon as the main

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102. Despite obvious inaccuracies, there is some truth in the statement of Sandeen (*op. cit.*, 81 f.) that 'Machen's group, representing the Princeton element, separated from a group calling itself the Bible Presbyterian Synod which was heavily influenced by dispensationalists.' For a scathing criticism of the whole episode, see Carnell, *op. cit.*, 116 ff.

concern shifted to the constructive task of building a church, the two outlooks were unable to work together and went their separate ways.<sup>103</sup>

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103. This thesis is ably propounded by G. M. Marsden, *The New School Presbyterian Mind* (University Microfilms), 1966, 299 ff. (cf. Marsden, 'Perspectives on the Division of 1937,' *op. cit.*). In comparing the New School mind with the Bible Presbyterian mind, Marsden notes at least the following similarities (309 ff.): 1) the claim to represent distinctively American Presbyterianism; 2) the stress on Americanism and patriotism; 3) the zeal for total abstinence; 4) the zeal for revival and 'legalistic reforms'; 5) the desire to see the Church as part of a wider reformation movement; 6) the emphasis on interdenominational cooperation; 7) the lack of concern for strict Presbyterian polity; 8) the toleration of doctrine at variance with the Westminster Confession such as modern dispensationalism.