

The Presbyterian Predicament

by

Parker T. Williamson

February 15, 2007

There was a time when Presbyterians knew what they believed. Rooted in Scripture, denominational leaders guarded the truth that had been entrusted to them. Aspiring ministers were tested for an unequivocal commitment to the church's faith.

Essential beliefs were specified, and candidates for ordination subscribed to them in writing. No scruples, no behind the back finger crossing, no "wink, wink" reservations, no private definitions of Biblically conceived and confessionally affirmed doctrine. The lines between belief and unbelief were clearly drawn and commonly understood. If a Presbyterian wanted to be ordained, he had to believe what Presbyterians believe.

Today, having lost more than half the denomination's membership, decimated its budget, consumed its endowments, and jettisoned most of its missionary force, Presbyterian Church (USA) managers are clinging to the vestiges of a vanishing institution.

What happened? What caused an unparalleled witness to the Gospel to be so rapidly swept toward oblivion? These are questions, not of conjecture, but of history.

Essential Tenets

On May 22, 1922, Harry Emerson Fosdick stepped into the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church in New York City and delivered a sermon titled, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" A Baptist, Fosdick subscribed to no creed. Thus, he was the ideal front for Presbyterian leaders who chafed when required to subscribe to

the denomination's five "fundamental" beliefs.¹ Modernists wanted more flexible standards – preferably no standards at all. Finding the historic doctrines of Christianity too confining, they insisted that the essence of Christian faith lies not in specified beliefs, but in one's "Christian experience."

Fosdick and the Presbyterians whose views he voiced were challenged by J. Gresham Machen, a distinguished professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary. In his book, *Christianity and Liberalism*,² Machen argued that the liberalism represented by Fosdick and his friends was not merely a different emphasis within Christianity, but a different faith altogether. He demonstrated that liberalism affirms:

- A different God (an immanent rather than transcendent 'deity').
- A different anthropology (human beings are essentially good).
- A different Jesus (a model human rather than personal Savior).
- A different scripture (a book of cultural, not divine origin).
- A different church (a political body whose primary mission is changing societal structures, not making disciples).

Machen argued that if the Presbyterian Church set aside "fundamental" Christian doctrines in favor of experience-based ideologies, it would no longer be "Presbyterian," nor could it even be called "the Church."

The 1926 General Assembly

In a 1924 document called The Auburn Affirmation, Presbyterians who sought to free the denomination from being tethered by "fundamental" Christian doctrines denied the inerrancy of Scripture and declared the virgin birth and the bodily

¹ Presbyterians aspiring to ordination were required to affirm: (a) the inspiration of the Bible by the Holy Spirit and the inerrancy of Scripture as a result of this inspiration; (b) the virgin birth of Christ; (c) the belief that Christ's death was an atonement for sin; (d) the bodily resurrection of Christ; (e) the historical reality of Christ's miracles.

² Machen, J.Gresham, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Erdman, 1923).

resurrection of Jesus Christ “theories.” Auburn Affirmation forces won control of the General Assembly, forced Machen to resign his Princeton professorship, ultimately revoked his ordination and, in a landmark 1926 General Assembly, abandoned the denomination’s requirement that ordained leaders subscribe to any particular beliefs. This removal of ‘fundamental doctrines,’ more recently referred to as “essential tenets,” was destined to have a seismic impact on the future of the Presbyterian Church.

How did this happen? Original signatories to the Auburn Affirmation numbered a very few persons, a tiny minority in the Presbyterian Church. Machen, a prolific writer and a founding editor of *Christianity Today*, enjoyed enormous support from Presbyterians in the pews, and he spoke for a decisive majority of the Princeton faculty. So how did a small minority so take control of the Presbyterian Church infrastructure that it could dump the denomination’s commitment to essential tenets of Christian faith and destroy the career of that faith’s primary Presbyterian spokesman?

Proponents of the Auburn Affirmation knew that the only way they could gain control of the denomination would be to forge an alliance with moderates, Presbyterians who loved institutional unity more than theology. Thus, they devised a plan to turn the debate away from doctrine, which they could not win, and toward a strategy for preserving denominational peace, a plan that they believed would attract moderate evangelicals.

They knew that Machen, whose writings had shown their position not only to be non-Presbyterian but also non-Christian, would never play ball with them. But might it be possible to recruit someone close to Machen’s camp, someone whose tone was more irenic, a recognized evangelical whose passion for preserving the denomination might trump his theological integrity?

That person would not have to agree with them theologically. In fact, they would be better served if he did not. All they needed was for that known evangelical to make room for their views and help them recast the denomination's focus from doctrinal differences ("essential beliefs") to unity (there's room under this tent for everyone). Such a person could tip the balance by pulling middle-of-the-road Presbyterians, albeit unknowingly, into the liberal camp.

Wooring the 'Middle'

Charles Erdman, Machen's Princeton Seminary colleague who described himself as a moderate evangelical fit that mold perfectly. Erdman was named moderator of the General Assembly in 1925, running on a peace platform. He urged the Presbyterian Church to get on with its ministry and not be distracted by troublesome doctrinal disputes.

Machen had no problem with Erdman's faith, but he was distressed by Erdman's willingness, either from political naiveté or misplaced priorities, to be used by those who would undermine the faith. "Dr. Erdman does not indeed reject the doctrinal system of our church," he said, "but he is perfectly willing to make common cause with those who reject it, and he is perfectly willing on many occasions to keep it in the background."³

Once elected, Erdman proceeded to appoint a commission of 15 people "to study the present spiritual condition of our Church and the causes making for unrest, and to report to the next General Assembly, to the end that the purity, peace, unity and progress of the Church may be assured."⁴ The group was largely comprised of liberals and peace seeking moderates. Missing were persons known to fight for doctrinal integrity.

³ *The Presbyterian*, February 5, 1925.

⁴ Minutes, General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, 1925

Erdman opened the 1926 General Assembly with a sermon that called on commissioners to work for peace and avoid being influenced by those who foment disunity.

Then the commission made its report. It called for doctrinal toleration, and it castigated unnamed Presbyterians who undermine church unity. In a tide-turning vote, the 1926 General Assembly adopted the commission's report, which, according to church historian Bradley Longfield, "made it clear that the five essentials had no binding authority and the arguments of the Auburn Affirmation had essentially been accepted *in toto*."⁵

That 1926 General Assembly was a watershed moment in the life of the Presbyterian Church. From this moment on, presbyteries ordained persons who said they affirmed "the essential tenets" of Christian faith, but would not specify what those essentials are. Soon, it became clear that what one presbytery deemed "essential" might be regarded by another as "discretionary."

Having steadfastly refused to be tied to any particulars since 1926, presbyteries have ordained and installed denominational leaders who exhibit a wide variety of beliefs and practices. Our condition is precisely what Machen predicted: we have become a broadly inclusive body that defies theological definition. We Presbyterians no longer know what we believe. Thus, the inevitable consequence: We no longer know who we are.

Denominational Déjà vu

Presbyterians who have studied their history cannot help but be struck by parallels between the denomination's 1926 and 2006 General Assemblies. Both assemblies received recommendations from politically appointed, "peace, and unity" task forces. In both cases, majority members of the task force embraced

⁵ Longfield, Bradley J.; *The Presbyterian Controversy: Fundamentalists, Modernists, and Moderates* (Oxford; Oxford University Press; 1991) p. 160.

theological liberalism. Each included minority members from the “evangelical” sector of the denomination, but those ‘evangelicals’ represented the most moderate, institutionally compliant, and easily manipulated members of their sector. In both 1926 and 2006, institutional preservation won the day over doctrinal integrity.

But why should these parallels surprise us? The 2006 General Assembly was simply the harvest of seeds sown by Auburn Affirmationists of our time, a group called the Covenant Network of Presbyterians. Speaking to an early gathering of this group, Barbara Wheeler (interestingly, from a place called “Auburn Seminary”) lamented the injustice that some Presbyterians are barred from ordination because they will not limit their sexual activity to marriage. She made excuses for some who in such circumstances choose to lie in order to be ordained. Then she laid out a plan. We don’t have the votes to overturn G-6.0106(b), she said. We’ve got to do what our forebears did in the 1920s. We’ve got to find an Erdman.

The Covenant Network searched the ranks of self-identified evangelicals, looking for the institutionally compliant who might help wedge moderates into the liberal camp. With the help of Stated Clerk Clifton Kirkpatrick, they called for “Common Ground Discussions” in 1996 and 1997, wooing John Huffman, Betty Moore and Craig Barnes into the conversation. It is my understanding that, although these three evangelicals accepted Kirkpatrick’s invitation to participate, they stood their ground and refused to compromise their convictions.

Undeterred by their failure to find common ground, the Covenant Network tried again. In 1998, they persuaded Kirkpatrick to invite Coalition moderator Jack Haberer and Roberta Hestenes to a meeting with homosexual activists. Together they forged “A Call to Sabbatical,” a 3-year deal whereby liberals said they would not try to remove G-6 if the evangelicals would agree not to enforce it. It was a sweet deal for the Covenant Network. It gave up nothing, since politically, no

amendment to remove G-6 had a chance of passage during that period, and it gained three years of space during which it laid the political groundwork for an all-out assault on G-6 at the Louisville Assembly.

When that assault was met with a crushing 3-1 defeat in the presbyteries, Covenant Network leaders dusted themselves off and regrouped. Having driven a wedge into the evangelical camp with their Call to Sabbatical, they hoped to do it again. They approached the Coalition, proposing a series of dialogues between representatives of the two groups. The experiment fizzled when during the second meeting, evangelical participants declined to sign a public statement, affirming a unity that did not exist.

Clifton Kirkpatrick initiated the next attempt. He invited Presbyterians to gather in Atlanta for a much heralded and denominationally funded, “unity in our diversity” conference. The entire Covenant Network board came at Kirkpatrick’s bidding, but when evangelicals saw the agenda, they largely boycotted the event. Among renewal leaders, only Jack Haberer, whom Kirkpatrick had named to the planning committee, and an additional renewal leader, who had been asked to serve on a panel, appeared. There was significant unity at the event, but little diversity. As reported by Jerry Van Marter of the Presbyterian News Service, the liberals ended up talking to themselves.

In 2001, Erdman-type strategists pulled out all the stops. They persuaded the General Assembly to create a “peace, unity and purity task force,” asking it to find a way forward for the now rapidly disintegrating denomination. Three members and one former member of a moderate renewal organization were appointed to the predominantly liberal group. After four years of largely private meetings, the task force produced a unanimous recommendation that was touted by the Stated Clerk as a major breakthrough in denominational peacemaking. In their pre-General Assembly politicking, members of the task force who wore

“moderate” and “progressive” labels paired off and hit the road, promoting their unity-in-our-diversity theme.

Erdman wins and loses

The Erdman strategy worked like a charm - just as it did in 1926 - enabling a majority in the 2006 General Assembly to trivialize the Trinity and amend the Constitution without the consent of the people.

But it is also true that the 2006 Erdman strategy did not work – just as it did not work in 1926. The 2006 General Assembly succeeded in forging a political consensus, but it did so at the cost of deeply dividing the denomination, not merely into two perspectives within Christendom, but into two, mutually exclusive, incompatible faiths. And one of those faiths, as Machen so brilliantly argued, is not Christian. Like Israelites torn between YHWEH and Baal, the 2006 General Assembly limped between two opinions, believing that it could encompass them both. Winning by political compromise, liberals at the 2006 General Assembly ignored Jesus’ warning: “What will it profit a person if he gains the whole world, but loses his soul?”

The Reign of Ahab and Jezebel

The reign of Ahab and Jezebel, a rein of cultural compromise, now almost 80 years old, has deeply wounded this denomination. A disease whose first symptoms were peripatetic has now infected the heart. The prognosis is clear: this denomination soon will be dead. What we have now is little more than a carcass consisting of real estate, endowments, sticks and stones. This dysfunctional ecclesiastical organization is not a church, for the marks of the church are gone.

The Church exists where its people gather around the Word of God, where they share a common faith, hope and love, being drawn into that Triune communion of grace: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Any association

that misses this mark dares not call itself a church – certainly not the “true church,” as minority institutionalists in Biblically faithful congregations have been encouraged by the office of the stated clerk so to name themselves.

Coerced Togetherness

During the recent General Assembly meeting, you heard Barbara Wheeler say of Jack Haberer, “I would not want to be part of any church where Jack does not also belong.” Mark Achtemeier said something similar of Scott Anderson, a task force member who professes to engage in same-sex behavior.

The apparent generosity of those words resonated with liberals and moderates, and we are hearing them quoted in presbyteries throughout the denomination. They were employed in my own presbytery by some who say they will not respect the 92 percent vote of Montreat Presbyterian Church requesting dismissal from the denomination. “We would not want to part of a presbytery where Montreat does not belong,” they said as they made plans to fortify the “loyal” eight percent minority and seize Montreat’s property.

But the purported “generosity” of those words invites examination. Consider this: A man who drags an unwilling female into his chamber might say in all apparent generosity, “I would not want to sleep in a bed where you do not also belong.”

There is a word for coerced togetherness. Surely we can agree that the word is not “love.” Even the thoroughly discredited Human Sexuality Report of 1991 included a principle called “mutual consent.”

Consider the “Louisville Papers,” documents that the Stated Clerk of this denomination has yet publicly to repudiate. He has not fired members of his staff who wrote them, nor has he urged synod and presbytery officials to disregard them. These advice and counsel memoranda reek of hubris. Their “I-do-not-

want-to-be-part-of-a-church-where-you-do-not-also-belong” attempt to forge a coerced togetherness does not affirm – in fact, it violates - the love of Christ.

Biblically faithful congregations will – honoring their fiduciary duty – fight to retain their property. But make no mistake about it: They will not sell their souls. In the final analysis – if every legal remedy fails – they will declare: “Let goods and kindred go. This mortal life also. The body they may kill. God’s truth abideth still. His kingdom is forever.”

‘The Kingdom of God is at Hand
Repent and believe the Gospel’

And that kingdom note, dear friends, signals the final point that I wish to make today. There is only one thing those who control the infrastructure of this denomination can do to stave off an impending institutional demise. Jesus himself said it: “The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe the Gospel.”

No political deals will do it. No more compromise. No more rejection of essential tenets of Christian faith. No more optional theology and optional ethics. No more appeals to “middle-way Presbyterians,” who – surely you have noticed – are now rapidly losing market share. We are at impasse. There are only two parties at the table. The time of partial, win/win, both/and compromise solutions is over.

Nothing short of falling on one’s knees, confessing one’s sin and pleading for mercy – nothing short of Metanoia – will do.

Sadly, I see no sign of repentance among those who have so badly mismanaged this denomination’s infrastructure; only a belligerence that curses the darkness on its way to the grave, and will not repent.

So be it: the Kingdom of God is at hand. The Lord Jesus will not leave this world without a witness. Even now he is lifting up voices in a world-wide resurgence of his Word. In Africa, in Asia, in Latin America, and yes, even here in America, the new wine of the gospel is bubbling forth, bursting at the seams. Do you see it?

Do not be afraid when that which is calcified cracks, shatters and falls away. Quickly, bring forth new wineskins that will stretch and take shape around this burgeoning new life. There is salvation in these words: "The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe the Gospel."