

Progress and Protest in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Presbyterianism

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Abstract

This article surveys the Presbyterian conflict in America at the turn of the twentieth century, which was marked by a drive for progress and a reaction of protest. After setting up the historical context, it looks at “progress” in action, theology, preaching, and presidents. It then focuses on the protest of J. Gresham Machen, who was engaged in church debates and publications (e.g., *Christianity and Liberalism*) and who, in response to progressive theology, founded Westminster Theological Seminary, an independent mission board, and a new denomination. It concludes with observations about the continuing witness of Westminster Seminary.

Keywords

Social gospel, progressive theology, Presbyterian conflict, Woodrow Wilson, Auburn Affirmation, J. Gresham Machen, Westminster Theological Seminary, theological education, mission, Westminster Confession of Faith

Introduction

In this article, I offer a whistle stop tour of Presbyterian progress and protest in the first three decades of the twentieth century.¹ The scene I set presupposes an imaginary series of dazzling lectures describing the northern Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA) after the close of the American Civil War. These lectures include five key data points.

First, there is the decision in the northern part of the country, approved by the voting majority of New School and Old School Presbyterians, to reunite the denominations that had divided decades earlier for doctrinal and ecclesiological reasons. On the whole, New Schoolers, while tethered to confessional moorings, tended to give themselves a lot of rope, permitting them to ride the social and political currents in America. Old School Presbyterians tied themselves tightly to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms, even if that occasionally left them out of touch with currents in American religious life.

Second, there is Princeton professor Charles Hodge's notoriously pessimistic prophecy (a gift occasionally permitted for Presbyterians) that even if the heretics in the church should come from the Old School, their defenders would come from the New School.

Third, as if to fulfill Hodge's prophecy, there is the case of Charles Briggs, a professor who developed a deficient understanding of biblical authority. He and others were eventually ejected from the ordained ministry. Curiously, while he was raised in Old School piety, it was a New School-inclined presbytery that protected him when he deviated from orthodoxy.

Fourth, there is the story of the revision of the Confession in 1903, in which systemic changes were offered to the church's subordinate standards. It was a debate that Hodge's successors lost: in 1903 the Calvinism of the Westminster Confession was softened to accommodate greater doctrinal diversity in the church.

Fifth, there is the 1906 union with the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, for which 1903 was only a prelude. This is an intriguing story for denominational geneticists: The Cumberland group was a rare breed of Presbyterians, for they were Arminians. As it happens, serious Calvinists and Arminians both opposed the union: although disagreeing about important doctrines,

¹ This article was first delivered as a lecture at the invitation of Westminster Theological Seminary on September 20, 2017.

they agreed about the importance of doctrine itself.² After all, even after 1903 the surviving Confession was still recognizably Reformed. If, as the act of Union would suggest, both Calvinists and Arminians were intended to subscribe to the same detailed system of doctrine, what did it say about the importance of doctrine? The initially puzzling, and apparently “paradoxical,” part of the story is that “the Cumberland Presbyterians who favored the merger and who went into the united church were the more liberal elements in the Cumberland church. . . . Yet they had accepted a much less liberal creed than that which they had.”³ But the fact that the union entailed an expansive understanding of subscription permitted more scope for liberals in both churches. As Francis Patton said, the union was, “in effect, not necessarily in intention, an indirect way of revising the Confession of Faith on radical grounds.”⁴

Doctrinal subscription would be relegated to Christianity’s most basic concepts—and which concepts, no one really knew. What you need to know is that most Presbyterians considered this a small price to pay for progress; they reasoned that a bigger church surely constituted a better church, and all peace, no matter the cost, was a good peace.

I. *Progressive Christians*

1. *Progressive Action: Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch*

At this time, progress was the thing. Following the American Civil War, reconstruction efforts (at least in theory), the rise of research universities, and charitable responses to industrialism, Western civilization felt a tremendous sense of progress, both in society and the church.

Across America, progressive clergy saw seminaries as places not so much to learn theology and biblical languages as to incorporate recent developments in humanitarianism, sociology, psychology, and comparative religions. Not for the first time in history, church leaders argued that religion is action, Christianity is a life, and we live in the here and now. Seminarians needed to be exposed to social problems and be taught how to apply social cures.

Pastoral courses equipped seminarians to lead churches at home that had become multipurpose service centers. For those who considered service

² John T. Ames, “Cumberland Liberals and the Union of 1906,” *Journal of Presbyterian History* 52 (Spring 1974): 3.

³ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴ Cited in David Calhoun, *Princeton Seminary: The Majestic Testimony, 1869–1929* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1996), 251.

abroad, missions courses suggested that the key task of the missionary was not the redemption of individuals with the gospel but the transformation of societies with American values. Soon any progressive clergyman could identify the promised land and the good news: it was America and democracy, material prosperity, scientific progress, and world peace.

Outside of seminaries, progress assumed some sinister forms. Behind South Africa, but ahead of Germany by a decade, America developed a fad to sterilize and, in some cases, lobotomize undesirables—the mentally incompetent, the unproductive, and the incorrigible. State and federal governments toyed with a variety of theories for improving society Darwinian style.

Eventually churches began to shift their emphasis from reforming individuals to reforming societal structures. Labor reforms and social justice captivated not only Christian thinkers, but churches, their pastors, and their sermons. Congregationalist minister Washington Gladden (1836–1918) and Baptist pastor Walter Rauschenbusch (1861–1918) led the charge for the social gospel at the turn of the twentieth century.

2. Progressive Theology: Made in Germany?

As it happened, preachers of the social gospel such as Gladden and Rauschenbusch also accepted higher criticism of the Bible. Many theologians rose above textual criticism of the Bible and advocated the use of comparative religions and theories of textual development; in so doing, these men reinterpreted, pared down, and dismissed increasingly large parts of the Bible.

Identifying the culprit responsible for the rise and spread of liberalism has become a Sunday afternoon pastime for conservative churchmen. After two world wars, it takes very little persuading to convince American evangelicals that the fault lies with the Germans. As it happens, the blame game started even earlier. Long before the opening disaster of the twentieth century, the evangelist Billy Sunday told his audiences that if you turned hell upside-down, you would find that it said, “Made in Germany.”

There is something existentially satisfying in blaming others for our problems: it just feels right to blame Friedrich Schleiermacher and his spiritual children for what was happening in America. Yet the identification of Germany with liberalism is hardly arbitrary. It was fashionable in academia to keep up with the Germans, and even if American theologians read German works more as a badge of respectability than as a set of propositions to consider, the influences from German universities proved corrosive to orthodoxy.

Whatever the causes of liberalism, excitement about American social and educational reform effectively hid how far theology could drift among the

progressive clergy. Because it advocated for such seemingly beneficial social changes, even those who disagreed with the trends in American seminaries underestimated the danger of progressive theology. By increasingly prioritizing issues of the day over eternity, people created room for theological error; however, liberalism would probably not have gained the prominence that it did without the aid of pastoral training centers.

Having buried Briggs a moment ago, it seems a little awkward to bring him back up again, but history is like that sometimes. Even though Briggs was defrocked by his denomination, he did not take off his academic regalia but continued to teach at Union Theological Seminary. In order to keep Briggs and other progressive professors employed, this seminary became independent of the Presbyterian denomination—a largely nominal independence, for the New York Presbytery gave the institution its benediction and readily accepted its graduates as candidates.

Others outside of New York City began to eye the graduates of Union with increased scrutiny. Consequently, in 1910, when the New York Presbytery licensed three candidates for licensure despite their refusal to affirm the virgin birth of Christ, it became a matter for the General Assembly. The 1910 General Assembly insisted upon not only the virgin birth but a total of five fundamentals: the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible, the virgin birth, Christ's death as an atonement for sin, bodily resurrection, and the historical reality of Christ's miracles. The Assembly declared these doctrines to be "essential and necessary," rightly adding that "others were equally so,"⁵ for these were fundamental doctrines!

Three aspects of the 1910 Assembly prove especially striking and significant for us moving forward: First, in emphasizing the importance of "fundamental" doctrines as "essential and necessary" for the ministers of the church, rather than insisting that the full range of doctrines in the Confession be necessary for ministers, the 1910 Assembly was employing a New School understanding of confessionalism. For those who are interested in the genealogy of ideas, there is a plausible long-distance relationship between New School thinking and what would come to be known as Fundamentalism. Second, and more obviously, it showed the immediate fruit of ecclesiastical union with the Cumberland Presbyterians. It is another reminder that it is not enough to merely have a Confession—it also matters how you hold it. "To have and to hold"—such a useful phrase for serious commitments! Third, Old School protests against this shrunken version of confessionalism—

⁵ Lefferts A. Loetscher, *The Broadening Church: A Study of Theological Issues in the Presbyterian Church Since 1869* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1954), 98.

expected as routine by this point in history—were conspicuous in their absence. The Philadelphia presbytery was silent. Princeton was silent. They knew they had lost the battle for the Reformed faith; they were now fighting for the survival of basic Christian orthodoxy.

It seems that there was a psychological and not simply a strategic aspect to their silence. Historians describe “the intellectual leaders of the right wing of the church at Princeton Seminary” as “an increasingly isolated body of intellectuals.”⁶ While this is true, we should not assume they were unaware of their isolation. I think they were profoundly conscious of their seeming irrelevance.

3. Progressive Preachers: Henry Sloane Coffin and Harry Emerson Fosdick

Princeton’s theologians looked like veterans fighting finished battles in their dreams, but the changes in seminaries and sermons were real, not imagined. All of the old denominations were renegotiating old doctrines. In addition to denying the five doctrines just mentioned, leading liberals announced that traditional interpretations of other doctrines were only theories and therefore optional. They posited that there were other ways of understanding Jesus’s identity, the return of Christ, and the mission of the church.

Inevitably there were ministers and theologians who were concerned about the rise of modernism, or liberalism. Equipped with oil money from Texas and theological perspectives from denominations across America, conservatives worked together to write twelve pamphlets on key doctrines. Published between 1910 and 1915, the series of pamphlets on these fundamental doctrines vigorously defended these biblical teachings as revealed truth rather than what the progressive clergy preferred to call debatable theory.

The most prominent progressive preacher inside the Presbyterian Church was Henry Sloane Coffin (1877–1954), an immensely popular preacher and later president of Union Theological Seminary. The Great War—which we now know was only the *First World War*—resulted in the largest loss of life then known to human history. This did not look like progress. Even Coffin admitted that the world is “vastly more tragic than we thought.” However, these were merely doubts about progress, and as historian Richard Gamble has written, they were not “anything resembling real disillusionment.”⁷ The

⁶ William J. Weston, *Presbyterian Pluralism* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 16–17.

⁷ Richard M. Gamble, *The War for Righteousness: Progressive Christianity, the Great War, and the Rise of the Messianic Nation* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2003), 236.

war forced progressive clergy to realize that progress was not as easy as they thought, let alone inevitable.

Despite the war's devastation, the definition of what constituted progress remained the same. Progress was still "the thing." In his adoring biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Eric Metaxas relates how Bonhoeffer found the elites at Coffin's country estate during the interwar period occupied with polite talk about education and the other constant interests of the progressive clergy and the social elite. In witnessing this phenomenon, Bonhoeffer noted that Jesus Christ was peripheral to Coffin's progressive conversations, and to Harry Emerson Fosdick's (1878–1969) Sunday sermons.⁸

Fosdick, a Baptist preacher, was by far the best known of all progressive preachers and a regular guest preacher at First Presbyterian Church in New York City. In 1922, he chose this venue to launch a battle with conservatives in the church. He entitled his sermon "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" In essence, Fosdick's sermon was a delayed response to the fundamentalist pamphlets; it made a splash by itself, but with the help of John D. Rockefeller Jr., it made waves. Rockefeller money transformed the sermon into a printed pamphlet that was distributed across the nation. Later, when the General Assembly required the New York Presbytery to investigate Fosdick's theology before permitting him to continue guest speaking, Rockefeller responded by building Fosdick the grand Riverside Baptist Church in Manhattan's Morningside Heights.

4. Progressive Presidents: The Case of Woodrow Wilson

In Rockefeller, progressives found the premier financier of the progressive movement—after all, he had constructed what was essentially a cathedral for Fosdick. But in Woodrow Wilson (1856–1924), more than any other political leader, the progressives found their diplomatic ally. It was only a matter of time before Wilson led America out of neutrality and into the First World War. Under Wilson, the American flag became the flag of humanity. As an "instrument in the hands of God," America entered the "War to end all wars."⁹ As America was a new Israel, American history could be learned from the Old Testament.

However, for Wilson and the progressive clergy, America was more than a new Israel: America had a messianic role that assumed international dimensions. In the language of service, America would lift the burdens of

⁸ Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (Nashville: Nelson, 2011), 330, 332–33.

⁹ Richard M. Gamble, "Savior Nation: Woodrow Wilson and the Gospel of Service," *Humanitas* 14.1 (2001): 16.

the world, “grant freedom,” and “uphold the righteous”—all Wilson’s phrases.¹⁰ When servicemen died, unless they were known to be Jewish, they were given grave markers with the Christian cross, monuments were decorated with angels, and plaques assured readers that these men were destined for heaven. The Great War became a saving work of the highest kind. Ultimately, as Richard Gamble notes, “Wilson reassigned the divine attributes of Christ to the American nation: the U.S. was the Mediator, the light of the world, the peacemaker, the bringer of salvation.”¹¹ Of course, as Augustine noted long ago, if any country or cause is too closely identified with the church, the opponents are infidels and heretics; as Gamble highlights, if America is the Savior, its opponents are diabolical. This problematic formulation in some ways parallels the biblical theological error on church-state relations found in the original Westminster Confession of Faith—but that is for another time.

Ultimately politicians used churches for their own propaganda purposes—a role that churches viewed as a privileged act of service. Furthermore, at his death, many mourned Wilson as a religious icon. Famously, former British Prime Minister David Lloyd George proclaimed that Wilson was “a failure, but a glorious failure. He failed as Jesus Christ failed, and like Christ, sacrificed his life in pursuance of his noble ideal.” He had come so close to the progress that he sought. He was Moses on the edge of the promised land; he was John the Baptist unable to live to see the kingdom: “There was a man sent of God whose name was Woodrow Wilson, to bear witness to that light of the world.”¹² Consequently, by the 1920s the grand old churches of America, especially in the North, had failed to keep their ministerial focus, were in the process of losing the gospel, and had become pawns of politicians. The church looked no better in its seminaries than on the mission field.

II. *Protest*

1. *J. Gresham Machen*

It was in the midst of these developments that J. Gresham Machen (1881–1937) was born in Baltimore, the second of three sons, to the young wife of a 53-year-old Harvard-trained lawyer. Both Machen’s father and mother were cultured Southerners; his mother had published one book, his father

¹⁰ Gamble, *The War for Righteousness*, 87.

¹¹ Gamble, “Savior Nation,” 20.

¹² Gamble, *The War for Righteousness*, 254.

some novels and short stories. As his chief influence Machen's mother taught him the Scriptures and the Shorter Catechism. Much of what we know of Machen comes from his frequent letters to his mother.¹³

Machen attended a private school, and after graduation from Johns Hopkins University with a focus on classics, did a year of graduate study and a stint at business school. He finally decided to enter Princeton Seminary in 1902. He was a sporty, fun-loving seminarian with addictions to tennis, cycling, mountain climbing, watching football, and playing checkers. He did not enjoy Hebrew or homiletics, and he complained that afternoon classes were an evil invention, an assertion which seems entirely reasonable. While at Princeton Seminary, Machen devoted any free time remaining after seminary and sports to earning a master's degree at Princeton University, where Woodrow Wilson was then the University President.

Machen's next port of call was Germany. At Marburg, he studied under the leading liberals of his day, the piety and arguments of some of whom were impressive, and he sometimes left lectures wondering how he could hold on to his Christian faith. These studies forced Machen to work out why orthodox Christianity was really true and why the Bible should be trusted. When his brother asked why he did not study under Theodor Zahn (1838–1933), the great conservative scholar of the day, he replied that that was not the Princeton way, which did not hide from students the current state of scholarship, whatever it might be.

Machen set himself out notably enough as a student both at Princeton and overseas in Europe that his former New Testament professor requested that he return to Princeton. Machen declined this request, but when B. B. Warfield was asked by the president of another academic institution for Machen's address, he declared that they could not have him, for he was coming to Princeton. In 1915, Machen finally agreed to return for a year. Princeton Seminary remained his home for fourteen years, save for his time as a Red Cross worker in the trenches of World War I, captured wonderfully in Barry Waugh's edition of Machen's war letters.¹⁴

2. *Christianity and Liberalism*

The battle between the fundamentalists (or conservatives) and modernists (or liberals) had already begun when Fosdick raised his standard in his sermon of 1922. The most memorable response to Fosdick came from

¹³ The definitive biography remains D. G. Hart, *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).

¹⁴ Barry Waugh, ed., *Letters from the Front: J. Gresham Machen's Correspondence from World War I* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2012).

Machen. He entitled his 1923 response *Christianity and Liberalism*. His stated purpose was “not to decide the religious issue of his day, but merely to present the issue as sharply and clearly as possible, in order that the reader may be aided in deciding it for himself.”¹⁵ In the process of “clarifying,” Machen argues that in countenancing liberalism, the Presbyterian Church was countenancing a religion other than, and opposed to, Christianity. The problem, Machen argued, went beyond individual doctrines. The errors that the church used to take seriously were now almost passé. For example, Charles Erdman, Machen’s colleague at Princeton Seminary, did not hold to biblical inerrancy and was yet considered a “moderate” in the controversy.¹⁶ With such positions now considered moderate or even mainstream, Machen’s conviction that he was fighting for the survival of doctrine itself appeared to be a curious fascination with the eddies.¹⁷

In his work, Machen pronounces the importance of doctrine in many different ways. Sometimes it is a plea for intellectual honesty. Machen points out that at ordination, ministers have to make vows. They are asked if they “sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith of this Church, as containing the system of Doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures.” He goes on to say, “If these ‘constitutional questions’ do not fix clearly the creedal basis of the Presbyterian Church, it is difficult to see how any human language could possibly do so.” The problem, for Machen, is that

immediately after making such a solemn declaration, immediately after declaring that the Westminster Confession contains the system of doctrine taught in infallible Scriptures, many ministers of the Presbyterian Church will proceed to decry that same Confession and that doctrine of the infallibility of Scripture to which they have just solemnly subscribed!¹⁸

Sometimes Machen argued from the specificity of the Confession itself.¹⁹ If the Confession were vague or allowing of many positions, liberals might earn some consideration—but the Confession is not vague. “The Confession, whatever its faults may be, is certainly not lacking in definiteness.”²⁰ Nor is the Confession inclusive. “The historic creeds,” Machen says, “were exclusive of error; they were intended to exclude error; they were intended to set forth

¹⁵ J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1923), 1.

¹⁶ Bradley J. Longfield, *Presbyterian Controversy: Fundamentalists, Modernists, and Moderates* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 140.

¹⁷ Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 17–53.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 163–64.

¹⁹ Ned B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 358, 366.

²⁰ Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 170.

the Biblical teaching in sharp contrast with what was opposed to the Biblical teaching, in order that the purity of the church might be preserved.” Machen clearly saw the Westminster Confession of Faith as one of those historic creeds. The Nicene Creed was clearer than the Apostles’ Creed, but, he declares, “How much more precise and how vastly richer still were the Reformation creeds and especially our Westminster Confession of Faith!”²¹

In yet another place Machen expresses the problem in terms of attitude. The importance of doctrine, he says, “concerns not merely the question as to the content of the doctrine that we are to set forth, but rather the attitude that is to be assumed with regard to all doctrine as such.”²² It is worth noting that while he abstains from direct debate regarding “necessary and essential” doctrines, Machen does speak predominantly (and perhaps exclusively) of the “system of doctrine” contained in the Confession.²³

3. The Auburn Affirmation and “Moderate” Presbyterianism

The official reply to the rising concern of conservatives, confessional thinkers like Machen, was penned at the end of 1923 and came to be known as the Auburn Affirmation. Shortly after its submission to the General Assembly in 1924, almost thirteen hundred ministers signed this affirmation. Remember that the 1910 Assembly had required all ministers to hold to at least five fundamental doctrines; the signers stated that the 1924 General Assembly, in enforcing the five fundamentals, was requiring an after-the-fact subscription to something extraconfessional. The conservatives, on the other hand, maintained that since ministers had already subscribed to the Westminster Confession of Faith, which clearly taught doctrines such as the bodily resurrection of Christ, incoming ministers should have no trouble affirming these integral doctrines.²⁴ Gordon Clark’s response among the conservatives is typical:

²¹ J. Gresham Machen, “The Creeds and Doctrinal Advance,” in *Scripture and Confession*, ed. John H. Skilton (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), 151–52.

²² J. Gresham Machen, *The Attack on Princeton Seminary: A Plea for Fair Play* (Princeton: J. Gresham Machen, 1927), 9.

²³ Machen did engage those who signed the Auburn affirmation the second time, particularly their additional note regarding Charles Hodge and his opposition to the Gardiner Springs Resolution. Machen pointed out that the purported parallels between the recent assembly’s decision and the Gardiner Springs Resolution are not truly analogous because the five fundamental doctrines are contained in the Confession, whereas, as Hodge noted, the additional stipulations for ministers recommended in the Gardiner Springs Resolution were truly extraconfessional. See Calhoun, *Princeton Seminary*, 510–11, n. 7.

²⁴ See Machen’s counteraffirmation recorded in Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen*, 367–68.

When future historians of the Church evaluate this present age, the publication of the Auburn Affirmation will stand out in importance like Luther's nailing up his ninety-five theses. But it will be important for a different reason. The reason the Auburn Affirmation is so important is that it constitutes a major offensive against the Word of God. It, or at least its theology, is the root of Presbyterian apostasy. Officials in the Presbyterian Church in the USA have commonly spread the rumor that there is nothing doctrinal involved in the Auburn Affirmation. This rumor, regardless of its source, is untrue. It is true that the Auburn Affirmation is a cleverly written document with some pious phraseology slightly obscuring its real intent. But once a person has seen exactly what it says, there is no disguising the fact that it is a vicious attack on the Word of God.²⁵

As expected, the Auburn Affirmation generated tensions in the church. After his 1925 election as moderator of the General Assembly, Erdman attempted to defuse these tensions by doing what Presbyterians always do: he appointed a committee. He tasked the committee with discovering the cause of disunity in the church and pointing out the way to peace. A year later, the committee happily reported that it found no traces of liberalism in the church. It determined that the sad cause of disunity was a party of conservatives who made unwarranted accusations against earnest ministers. Needless to say, most of the ministers in the church were not liberals at that time—but a great many were moderates: if not liberal themselves, they were willing to live with liberals within the church. Consequently, the liberals and the moderates have maintained a majority in the assemblies of the PCUSA from 1925 to this day.

4. *The Battle for Theological Education*

The remainder of the story can be told quickly. The 1926 General Assembly appointed a new committee to focus on Princeton Seminary, the source of many of these disruptive conservatives. While the Assembly did not mention him by name, everyone knew that the committee's real target was Machen. In response to the marginalization that he and other confessionalists at Princeton faced, Machen founded a new seminary, Westminster Theological Seminary, in downtown Philadelphia in 1929. But in spite of broad opposition to the reorganization of Princeton, and widespread distress with the moderates and liberals of the church, he managed to draw away only a few young talented students and teachers from Princeton—he could not attract the retired, or almost retired, professors.

²⁵ Gordon H. Clark, "The Auburn Heresy (1935)," *The Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, 2020, <https://www.opc.org/cce/clark.html>.

5. The Fight for Foreign Missions

It was hard to start a new seminary as Wall Street crashed and the Great Depression began. It was even harder to see Christians give their hard-earned money to church missionaries who no longer believed the gospel. The mission field was a battlefield. Nobel and Pulitzer Prize-winning missionary Pearl Buck was a trophy for liberal Presbyterians. An accomplished woman leaving her mark on the world stage, she also happened to think that Christian distinctives were hardly necessary for Chinese peasants. Indeed, she publicly referred to historical understandings of salvation as “superstitious.”

The events that follow are well known. In 1932, the General Assembly of the PCUSA accepted a report that refused to censure Buck for her comments. The Assembly also accepted a report on missions funded by Rockefeller called “Re-thinking Missions.” It called missionaries not to conceive of Christianity as the exclusive religion approved by God and urged that humanitarian causes, rather than evangelism, be promoted at the heart of missions. These were the decisions that Machen and his colleagues had dreaded, but predicted, if the church were to continue to veer off course. And yet the decisions of the assembly appeared plausible to the moderates of the denomination because they had the support of Rev. Robert Elliott Speer (1867–1947).

Speer was the prince of the moderates in the Presbyterian Church, one-time head of almost every evangelical organization that mattered, a respected champion of foreign missions, and secretary of the church’s board of missions. He argued for the uniqueness of Christ to an extent that the liberals suspected him of fundamentalism. But he was so averse to theological conflict and so unwilling to speak out against rank liberalism on the mission field that he was not trusted by fundamentalists. Despite her doctrinal position, the mission’s board, under Speer’s leadership, decided that Buck did not need censure. Machen decried this decision and took the lead in forming an Independent Board for Foreign Missions in 1933. He encouraged conservative churches and individuals to support this new parachurch institution instead of the board of the church.

As it happens, Presbyterians—especially New School Presbyterians—had been supporting parachurch organizations that rivaled denomination institutions since the beginning of the nineteenth century. In the spheres of home missions, foreign missions, seminary education, and Sunday school training, Presbyterians possessed the freedom to support generically evangelical institutions instead of uniquely Presbyterian ones. Nevertheless, liberals took umbrage at this new institution that could potentially drain funds away from liberal missionaries. As a result, by 1935, all members of

Machen's Independent Board who were ordained in the PCUSA were suspended from ministry. In a vain effort to keep the board itself from being rejected by the PCUSA, fundamentalists on the board even removed Machen as president, lest the work of the board be tainted by his own struggles. Machen was deeply grieved but labored on.

6. The Presbyterian Church of America

Machen's journey during these years was a brutal one. He tried to move his credentials to the presbytery of Philadelphia, where he now lived, and where a majority favored his confessional outlook, but his effort ran aground because, according to the clerk of the denomination, there was an error in the paperwork. Machen was to remain a minister in a hostile New Jersey presbytery. Committees that comprised solely his opponents met behind closed doors; surprise meetings, moving deadlines, and devious methods of every sort were used to maneuver Machen to the sidelines. Indeed, he was never given a chance to defend himself, for he was forced to answer yes and no questions like a child. No record of the meetings was permitted; he was permitted no stenographer to keep a record; the PCUSA then closed its archives on Machen.

Opposition to Machen was bitter. It could be expressed rather crudely, as in an anonymous letter which addressed him as the "Professor of Bigotry" and read, *sic*, "You got a well deserved spanking today. Now just stop calumniating your brethren and broaden out your miserable Theology and learn to be a Christian. or else Get Out." This particular letter is quoted in Wayne Headman's 1974 Princeton Seminary ThM thesis.²⁶ Headman points out that the letter was posted in Baltimore on June 2, 1926—the place and time of the general Assembly. The letterhead, blacked out, but now visible over time, shows that the letter came from some person or persons of the Church's own Board of Christian Education.²⁷ Other charges against Machen, such as Erdman's assertion that "Dr. Machen's tone and methods of defense" should disqualify him from promotion, were more cautious in tone, but much more damaging, as they were spoken before the church and, courtesy of the *New York Times*, before the world.²⁸

Some of the opposition appears to be petty nastiness. But it is easy to overlook how dangerous Machen appeared from the vantage point of those promoting the progress of peace. Machen thought people were saying

²⁶ Wayne Headman, "A Critical Evaluation of J. Gresham Machen" (ThM thesis, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1974), 88.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 88–89.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 87.

peace, peace, when there was no peace. This was not an acceptable message in the 1930s either in the church or in politics. It was about this time that there was another oddball, this one in England, who worried about Germany as a political threat in the 1930s. Career bureaucrats in the state had no more patience with Churchill than career bureaucrats in the church had with Machen. Both men in their own way came across as warmongers, cranks that ought to be ignored if possible, silenced if not.

Machen was finally defrocked and removed from the ministry of the PCUSA, but his trial was a charade and a travesty of justice. A group of ministers responded by renting a hall and starting a new denomination—something that Protestants do from time to time.²⁹

As a minister of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) I often get asked, usually on elevators, what makes the OPC different from the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). If we are only going one floor, I just say, “We were the PCA first!” After all, in 1936 the fledgling church named itself the Presbyterian Church of America. But while it was called the Presbyterian Church of America, the denomination was supported not only at home but also abroad: foreign missionaries risked everything, gave up their pensions, and joined the new denomination—including a certain Richard Gaffin and his wife, who were laboring in China. The PCA was promptly sued for having a name too similar to their opposite, so it chose a new name that highlighted its differences with the mainline church. But no one dared to sue the Presbyterian Church in America, which started in the 1970s because—and this detail also explains the real difference between the PCA and the OPC—the PCA has better lawyers. That is what I would add if we are going to the third floor.

The seminary and the denomination that Machen started both attempted to move forward by looking backward. They recognized that Presbyterians had surrendered the city to hold the citadel, but giving up Reformed theology to hold on to a few fundamental doctrines did not really work. So both the seminary and the denomination attempted to self-consciously recover the riches of the Reformed faith. As with the seminary, it was also hard to start a new denomination after years of severe economic depression. Many congregations were unhappy with the old denomination, but they were hesitant

²⁹ See D. G. Hart, “The Legacy of J. Gresham Machen and the Identity of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 53.2 (1991): 209–25; D. G. Hart and John Muether, *Fighting the Good Fight: A Brief History of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia: Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1995); Edwin H. Rian, *The Presbyterian Conflict* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1940; repr., Philadelphia: Committee of the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1992).

to leave their buildings—for in the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America it was a sure thing that the denomination would win every battle over property, much like the American Episcopal church does today when congregations attempt to leave it. Even if entire congregations would leave to join the OPC, they would have to give their property to the PCUSA. Those who did leave would have to meet in rented facilities, storefronts, and homes.

Machen was speaking on behalf of this new denomination in North Dakota in December 1936 when, exhausted from the long battle, he developed pneumonia and died on January 1, 1937. Famously, just before his death, he had a telegram sent to his dear friend and colleague John Murray: “I’m so thankful for active obedience of Christ. No hope without it.”³⁰ He is buried in Baltimore. His gravestone reads, “Faithful unto Death” in Greek.

III. A Continuing Witness

Thankfully, not only the denomination but also the seminary weathered those storms and survived the loss of a leader. Almost a century later the continued existence of Westminster Seminary reminds us of a vision worthy of humble promotion and gracious defense.

Machen founded a biblical seminary. He wanted to teach in such a way that the faculty would not only commend a system of doctrine but persuade from the Scriptures. He wanted to emphasize the skills required for building theology from the ground up. This is our immediate heritage and part of what comes to mind when the “Westminster brand” of education is mentioned in North America and beyond.

Machen advocated a Confessional seminary. The Westminster name is meant to remind us of an older heritage as well. It recalls some of the richest of Protestant confessional documents and the last milestone of the long Reformation. Its motto emphasizing “The Whole Counsel of God” (cf. Acts 20:27, *pasan tēn boulēn tou Theou*) reminds us that theological flourishing requires a confession longer than ten points on a website.

Westminster was intended to be what would later be termed an evangelical seminary. In addition to believing in a Reformed doctrine of the church, we believe in a Reformed doctrine of the communion of the saints. From the beginning Westminster welcomed to its student body those who wished to be part of the recovery and proclamation of Christ’s gospel in every age. This too is part of our Westminster tradition: knowing where the boundary

³⁰ Stonehouse, *fr. Gresham Machen*, 508.

lines lie between confessionally and experientially defined communions, but choosing to talk at the curb instead of lobbing verbal grenades over fences.

Westminster was of course intended to be a practical seminary. To state the obvious, Machen and his colleagues wanted to build a place where consistories and sessions send their prospective pastors, a place where all qualified people could grow in their gifts and graces. It was started for the sake of the church; he intended a seminary and not just another graduate school. This continues to be a useful vision. The church desperately needs improvement in the quality of its preachers and preaching. Surely the heart of Westminster's continuing purpose must lie with mentoring men to be the kind of pastors and churchmen that congregations covet and presbyteries prize. Our desire is to be a constructive and useful seminary. For obvious reasons, Westminster has tended to pursue these goals by teaching; I am sure it is already obvious to everyone that the seminary must also do a lot of listening: What are we doing well? Where are we falling short? What can we improve?

Finally, Westminster was founded as an embodied seminary with a physical presence. Of course, in the 1920s, the only other option was study by correspondence. But the physical presence of the seminary has proved to be important. By providing men and women a richly resourced residential sanctuary for two to four years of study, Westminster has been able to serve a constituency well beyond cities on the East Coast. Admittedly, the seminary curriculum has always had a Western slant, but it has nonetheless drawn many of its students from non-Western cultures. And just as Machen's *Christianity and Liberalism*, written for one particular audience, has proved useful in a wide variety of ecclesial ecosystems, so too, I pray, this seminary in a Philadelphia suburb will prove to be a powerful witness—and sometimes a protest—against false progress in the church and in the world.