

Symposium: Revisiting the Division of 1937—The Orthodox Presbyterian Church
in Its American Ecclesiastical Context

PERSPECTIVE ON THE DIVISION OF 1937*

by George M. Marsden

Machen wrote, “We became members, at last, of a true Presbyterian Church. What a joyous moment it was....”¹

American Presbyterianism

THE FORMATION of the Presbyterian Church of America (PCA) on the afternoon of June 11, 1936, was certainly a moment of deep satisfaction for Dr. Machen. The organization of the new church was a tribute to the faith which he loved, and the enthusiastic unanimity of the assembly in electing him to be its first moderator was a tribute to his leadership in the fight to preserve historic Presbyterianism within the Presbyterian Church in the USA (PCUSA).

Yet the emotion of the eminent leader of the new denomination could not have been only joy that afternoon. The formation of the PCA marked the last entrenchments in a war that had been all but lost. Machen recognized that the events of the last decade had “been a triumph of unbelief and sin in the Presbyterian Church in the USA.”² The sorrow of continued defeats was tempered only by the joy of Christian fellowship and the hope for the future of a strong and united truly Presbyterian church. The members of the newly-constituted assembly appeared to be united if not strong. They were united in their opposition to modernism, and they were united in their expression of loyalty to “historic Presbyterianism.”

A year later, in June of 1937, the PCA was divided. Immediately following its Third General Assembly a minority of its ministers and elders withdrew to form the Bible Presbyterian Synod. This new denomination was organized, its founders stated, “because of the departure of the Presbyterian Church of America from the historic position of American Pres-

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¹ J. Gresham Machen, “A True Presbyterian Church at Last,” *Presbyterian Guardian* 2 (June 22, 1936), 110.

² *Ibid.*

byterianism.”³ The *Presbyterian Guardian*, speaking unofficially for the majority who had remained in the PCA took an opposite view. “The Presbyterian Church of America,” it wrote, “has shown once again that it is determined to go forward in the historic channels of Presbyterianism regardless of cost.”⁴ Within less than a year the men who had united with Machen in forming “a true Presbyterian Church” were divided into two denominations, each of which claimed to represent the tradition of “historic (American) Presbyterianism.” That each side should make such an appeal to the history of Presbyterianism in America suggests that the issues which divided the PCA were not entirely new, but that they reflected two distinct traditions within American Presbyterianism.

The Third General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of America which met in Philadelphia on June 1, 1937, found its delegates sharply divided into two parties. Their differences focused on three distinct issues. The first was a doctrinal issue, concerning the attitude of the church toward the dispensational form of premillennialism. The second was a moral issue, centering on the question of whether the church should officially recommend to its members total abstinence from alcoholic beverages. The third was a matter of polity, concerning the question of whether the church should continue to conduct its foreign missions through an independent agency in cooperation with non-Presbyterians.

History generally does not repeat itself in one-hundred-year cycles. Yet the commissioners to the Third General Assembly of the PCA may well have felt at home had they been able to attend the Presbyterian general assembly which had met in Philadelphia just one century earlier. In 1837 the PCUSA was similarly divided between two parties, the “Old School” and the “New School.” In that year the disagreement between the two parties had focused on three major issues. The first was a doctrinal issue, concerning the attitude of the church toward the “New Theology” which was being imported into the New School from New England. The second was a moral issue, centering on the question of whether the church should officially condemn certain practices, most notably Negro slavery and the beverage use of alcohol. The third issue was a matter of polity, concerning the question of continued cooperation with Congregationalists in the Plan of Union of 1801 and with non-Presbyterians in independent agencies for missions, Christian education, and moral reform.^{4a}

This striking parallel between the issues which divided the New School from the Old School in 1837 and those which divided the Bible Presbyterians from the PCA in 1937 hardly can be entirely coincidence. Although the details on which the controversies focused were quite different, the essential lines of division were nearly identical. In both cases we find one party (the Old School and the majority in the PCA) insisting on a strict interpretation of the Presbyterian standards, and a second

³ “Act of Association of the Bible Presbyterian Synod,” quoted in *Christian Beacon* 2 (June 10, 1937), 1.

⁴ *Presbyterian Guardian* 4 (June 24, 1937), 1.

^{4a} Cf. Lefferts A. Loetscher, *The Broadening Church* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1957), 5.

party (the New School and the minority) maintaining that subscription to the standards should not preclude a certain latitude of interpretation in doctrine and in ethics and cooperation with non-Presbyterian agencies. The cleavage between the two schools in 1837, like the cleavage within the PCA in 1937, reflected the conflict of two traditions which have survived within American Presbyterianism since its beginnings. In the eighteenth century this conflict had first developed in the debate over subscription to the Westminster Standards and then in the controversy of the “Old Side” and the “New Side” over revivalism which resulted in a division of the church from 1741–1758.

The character of these two traditions within American Presbyterianism has been admirably summarized by Smith, Handy, and Loetscher in *American Christianity*:

Presbyterians of English Puritan or New England Puritan background tended toward a “low church” or more subjective, less authoritarian conception of Presbyterianism, which in the eighteenth century was called New Side and in the nineteenth century New School; while Presbyterians of Scottish and Scotch-Irish background tended toward a “high church” or more objective and authoritarian conception of the heritage, known in the eighteenth century as Old Side and in the nineteenth as Old School. In a sense the history, especially the theological history of American Presbyterianism has revolved around these two poles.⁵

In general it has been assumed that after the reunion of the Old School and the New School in 1869 the conflict between these two traditions re-emerged in the conservative-modernist controversy which culminated in the formation of the PCA in 1936.⁶ But it is only partially true to say that there is a continuity between the New School and modernism. Certainly there was an element of continuity in their common opposition to the strict subscription of the Old School and to the theology taught at Princeton Seminary. And certainly the New School attitude of tolerance of doctrinal innovation may have helped to open the door which let theological liberalism into the church. But it would be misleading to imply that there was any considerable direct continuity between the *theology* of the New School and modernism. The theology of the New School had been born in New England and grew out of a strict Reformed tradition. As it developed in the New School it never strayed very far from that tradition.⁷

A certain continuity between the New School and modernism might be suggested in the areas of ethics and polity. The modernists had an interest in social reform and favored cooperation with non-

⁵ H. Shelton Smith, Robert T. Handy, and Lefferts A. Loetscher, *American Christianity*, Vol. I, 1607–1820, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1960), 262.

⁶ For example, Lefferts A. Loetscher, *The Broadening Church*, p. 18 states: “But, of course, as the present study maintains throughout, broad continuities can be discerned, if the identity is not pressed too closely, between earlier New School positions and later ‘liberalism.’”

⁷ Cf. A. A. Hodge, *The Life of Charles Hodge* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1880), 289: “The subsequent course of the New School, as a separate denomination, clearly proves that in all essentials the majority of them were sound Presbyterians, alike in principles of order and in doctrine....”

Presbyterianism. On the other hand, it was the liberal wing which favored strong central control of the PCUSA in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Whatever we might conclude about the possible continuity between the New School and modernism, we can find clear evidence that the two traditions of American Presbyterianism survived into the twentieth century within the conservative camp itself. While they were allied against the common enemy of modernism the conflict of the two traditions was not always obvious. But once the conservatives who left the PCUSA in 1936 found themselves united in the PCA the old lines of controversy re-emerged almost immediately.

That each side in the Presbyterian Church of America could present itself as the legitimate heir to a major tradition within American Presbyterianism may be seen from an examination of the background of each of the three major issues which divided the young church.

We turn first to dispensational premillennialism. Dispensationalism in its modern form originated in the nineteenth century. It grew largely out of the work of John Nelson Darby (1800-1882) and his followers, particularly the Plymouth Brethren.⁸ In the second half of the nineteenth century dispensational schemes of biblical interpretation became widely popular in America and became closely associated with premillennial eschatology.⁹ The influence of the new methods of Bible study was never confined to any one denomination of American Protestantism. The most notable manifestations of the movement were the International Bible and Prophecy Conferences held in New York State from 1878-1897. These conferences were closely associated with the popular revival movements of the late nineteenth century, and like the revival movements were interdenominational.¹⁰

The interdenominational character of the movements associated with dispensationalism was natural to the dispensational scheme of things. The dispensationalists' doctrine of the church emphasized the spiritual quality of the church's life, often to the point of denying the reality of its organizational structure or earthly boundaries.¹¹ Despite the interdenominational character of the movement, dispensationalism initially had its greatest appeal among Protestants of Calvinistic background, who already had acquaintance with covenantal schemes. According to Norman Kraus, "the basic theological affinities of dispensationalism are Calvinistic."¹² Because of these affinities, it was natural that the new emphases should develop strong roots within the PCUSA.

The question relevant to our study is: how did dispensationalism relate to the two major traditions in American Presbyterianism? Since dispensationalism did not become a major force in the religious life of Amer-

⁸ Norman Kraus, *Dispensationalism in America* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1956), Chapters 1 and 2. Cf. George Eldon Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956); and William H. Rutgers, *Premillennialism in America* (Goes, Holland: Oosterbaan and Le Cointre, 1930).

⁹ Premillennialism, of course, need not be associated with modern dispensationalism.

¹⁰ Kraus, Chapters 1-3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 134.

¹² *Ibid.*, 59.

ica until after the time of the reunion of the Old School and the New School in 1869, it is impossible to make any positive identification of dispensational tendencies in either of the two Presbyterian schools. Yet dispensationalism did become a considerable factor in American Presbyterianism very shortly after the reunion. So we may look for affinities between dispensational interpretations and the traditions of the two schools.

Factors which would lead us to expect dispensationalism to appeal to the New School tradition include the following: both were closely associated with revivalism,¹³ both favored interdenominational cooperation and work through independent agencies; both tended to favor a less authoritarian role of the visible church; and the tendency of the New School to emphasize a simple Christianity, as opposed to intellectualism, would tend to make the New School more susceptible to the simple literalism of dispensational exegesis. More positive continuity of the two movements is suggested by the fact that dispensationalism seems to have flourished in the same areas that the New School flourished—upstate New York and the Midwest. There is also at least some identity of personnel between the two movements.¹⁴ The least we can say is that there is some continuity in their common opposition to the traditionalism of the Old School–Princeton theology.¹⁵

Nevertheless, at the time when biblical Christianity was challenged by modernism in the PCUSA, the dispensationalists were firmly allied with the conservative camp. Dispensationalists claim first of all to be biblicists,¹⁶ and their emphasis on literal interpretation of Scripture suggests a thoroughgoing reaction to all tendencies which might suggest the methods of liberal exegesis. Such strict views on Scripture make them natural, though sometimes uneasy, allies of the Presbyterians who championed the Old School heritage. In the PCUSA during the 1920s, the crucial decade in the battle against modernism, there seems to have been no question of any rift within the conservative camp. As long as conservatives were confronted with the presence of modernists within their own institutions, and as long as there was real hope of retrieving control of the church, there was little time for disputes on fine points. The militant defense of the authority of the entire Bible itself was the crying need of the hour.

Turning to the issue of total abstinence, questions of moral reform

¹³ New School revivalism, particularly in the western territories, had been one of the important sources of tension with the Old School.

¹⁴ Among the precursors of the dispensational movement is the famous New School leader and moderator, George Duffield (Kraus, 54). Another New School leader, Samuel H. Cox (Moderator of the New School assembly in 1846), is noted for a dispensational scheme which was in outline "the exact parallel of Scofield's system." *Ibid.*, 30.

On the other hand, James Hall Brookes and Nathaniel West, two of the most active leaders in the International Prophecy Conferences, were former members of the Old School Presbyterian Church. Nevertheless, both men worked in the midwest where Old School emphases were less distinct.

¹⁵ However, we should not press this continuity too closely. Dispensationalism was a new—and in many ways unique—development in American theology and therefore cannot be identified exactly with any of the theological or ecclesiastical developments which preceded it.

¹⁶ Kraus, 57.

have long been debated by American Presbyterians. The two sides of the debate represent roughly the two major traditions in Presbyterianism. On the one hand is the tradition associated with English Puritanism, New England Puritanism, New School Presbyterianism and revivalism, which stresses the obligation of the church to take a strong official stand with regard to all sorts of moral and social problems that are not explicitly condemned or condoned in Scripture. On the other hand is the tradition associated with Scottish and Continental Presbyterianism, the Old School, and Princeton Seminary, which has maintained that the individual should be allowed the liberty to judge for himself on such matters.

In 1818, at the time when the PCUSA was cooperating closely with the Congregationalists under the Plan of Union of 1801, the Presbyterian General Assembly first recommended that the officers and members of the church, “abstain even from the common use of ardent spirits.”¹⁷ The assemblies of 1829 and 1830, controlled by a New School majority, adopted similar resolutions and recommended the formation of temperance societies.¹⁸ The Old School party opposed such recommendations and at the time of the division of 1837 rejected any official stand on moral reforms. After the division the New School took a strong stand for total abstinence, declaring in 1840 that total abstinence from everything that may intoxicate is “the only true principle of temperance.”¹⁹ In direct reference to such a statement, Charles Hodge, the most distinguished representative of the Old School position, wrote in 1843:

This declaration of the immorality of the manufacture, sale and use of all intoxicating drinks as a beverage ... is a declaration that their sale and use are, and always have been sinful.... It has led to a disregard of the authority of the Word of God, to a shameful perversion of its meaning, to shocking irreverence in the manner of speaking of our blessed Redeemer.²⁰

The Old School general assemblies maintained their silence on this subject until 1865, when, just after the Civil War and when there was much talk of reunion with the New School, they did recommend that their ministers enjoin their young men to practice total abstinence.²¹ After the reunion of the two schools the General Assembly of 1877 reconfirmed the New School resolution of 1840. In the years following the First World War and prohibition the PCUSA reaffirmed its official stand in favor of total abstinence, declaring in 1934 and 1936 that total abstinence was the “Christian ideal.”²² In the twentieth century many of the defenders

¹⁷ Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., 1818, 689–90. From *Digest of the Acts and Deliverances of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1923, Vol. I, 468).

¹⁸ *Minutes*, 1829, 298. From *Digest*, 469.

¹⁹ *Minutes* (New School), 1840, 15. From *Digest*, 469.

²⁰ Charles Hodge, *Discussions in Church Polity* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1878), 224–25.

²¹ *Minutes* (Old School), 1865, 570. From *Digest*, 469–70.

²² *Minutes*, 1934, 198; 1936, 156. From *The Presbyterian Constitution and Digest* (Phila-

of total abstinence were found within the conservative camp of the Presbyterian Church and were the most enthusiastic supporters of the fundamentalist movement. But not all conservatives were in favor of total abstinence. They were allied with the fundamentalists in their fight against modernism, but did not share the ethical views of their reform-minded brethren.

The final issue was independency. In the early nineteenth century, prior to the founding of official denominational mission boards, the PCUSA had cooperated with non-Presbyterians in various independent agencies such as the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. At the time of the division of 1837 the Old School opposed cooperation with independent agencies because these agencies helped to spread a theology which was not distinctly Presbyterian. Accordingly, the Old School conducted its mission work through its own denominational agencies. The New School, on the other hand, favored interdenominational cooperation and continued to conduct its missions through independent agencies for a time. Eventually, however, the New School was forced to end its close cooperation with other denominations and to establish denominational mission boards. After the reunion of 1869 the PCUSA continued to conduct all its missions through denominational boards.

In 1933 this pattern was broken when J. Gresham Machen and his associates established the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions. In support of an independent mission board its founders appealed both to the constitution of the church and to the precedents in Presbyterian history. But in the last analysis the board was founded and maintained, not because of the inherent virtues of independent missions agencies, but because its founders were convinced that it was the only means through which they could conduct truly Presbyterian mission work free from the influence of modernism.

In establishing the Independent Board Machen and his associates at Westminster Seminary were breaking with their own tradition which favored a strong and unified system of church government. Dr. Ned B. Stonehouse recognized this in his biographical memoir of Machen when he wrote:

It must be admitted that there was an element of abnormality about the formation of an Independent Board since under ordinary circumstances the missions program would be conducted by official agencies of the Church. But these were abnormal times, and the bold and explosive action of the organizers of this Board, if it is to be fairly evaluated, must be understood in the context of the historical situation.²³

Not everyone associated with the Independent Board shared these sentiments. As in the PCA, both of the Presbyterian traditions were represented on the board. Certain of its members maintained that the

delphia: The United Presbyterian Church U.S.A., 1956), A710.

²³ Ned B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memior* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 498.

practice of independency was not incompatible with Presbyterian missions, and they favored some cooperation with sympathetic non-Presbyterians. Nevertheless, every effort was made to insure that the board would be as distinctly Presbyterian as possible. With this interest the charter of the board explicitly stated that it would support only those missions which were consistent with the Westminster Standards and the “fundamental principles of Presbyterian Church government.”²⁴

Clash of Two Traditions

The men who met together in the First General Assembly of the PCA were well aware that they were not of one mind on every detail of doctrine and practice. Yet, from all appearances, they had reason to believe that their essential agreement in their common faith would far outweigh their differences as to detail. All agreed that the Scriptures were the infallible Word of God, that the Westminster Standards contained the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures, and that the principles of Presbyterian church government were founded upon the Word of God.²⁵ Yet almost as soon as the business of the First Assembly commenced it became evident that it would be the differences in detail which would be accentuated. Each delegate had a vision of this “true Presbyterian Church.” It was to represent the true succession of “historic Presbyterianism.” But already there were two opinions as to the precise course which the achievement of such an ideal would require.

The emerging discord centered first on the adoption of the constitution. A committee on the constitution was appointed and authorized to recommend the adoption of the Westminster Standards at the Second General Assembly. They were given power to recommend no changes except the possible elimination of the changes in the standards which had been made by the PCUSA in 1903.²⁶ This action was favored by the majority of the assembly, but opposed informally by a minority who claimed that the standards should be adopted intact in the interest of maintaining the direct spiritual succession of the PCUSA.²⁷ Although the issue of the exclusion of the 1903 amendments from the constitution was not ultimately one of the major factors in the division of the denomination, the lines drawn in this debate were essentially the same as would develop over the other issues.²⁸

Whatever notes of discord there were at that First General Assembly seem to have been swallowed up by the dominant theme of harmony and of hope. “There were sometimes vigorous exchanges of opinion,” commented the *Guardian*. “But always there was the unity

²⁴ “The Charter of the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions,” in the *Presbyterian Guardian* 4 (June 6, 1937), 79.

²⁵ Minutes of the First General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of America, 4.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 7–8.

²⁷ Robert S. Marsden, ed., *The First Ten Years*, (Philadelphia: The Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1946), 5; Stonehouse, *Machen*, 503.

²⁸ Marsden, 5.

of the spirit in the bond of peace.”²⁹ When the First General Assembly adjourned there were only intimations of anything but concord among its members. But by the time the Second General Assembly met, five months later, the lines of division between the two parties in the church had already been sharply drawn.

The first major theological issue on which the PCA was forced to take a stand was that of eschatology. By the time the new church was organized the questions involved had already been well developed in a debate which centered around Westminster Seminary. When the seminary was founded in 1929 its position on eschatology was not altogether clear. The faculty was primarily concerned with continuing the battle against modernism. Since Westminster had grown directly out of Princeton Seminary it tended toward the Old School Presbyterian tradition. This tendency was accentuated by the presence on the early faculty of representatives of the Dutch and Scottish traditions. Nevertheless, in the early years the faculty did include at least one representative of the opposing tradition, Allan A. MacRae of the department of Old Testament.^{29a}

Dispensational premillennialists associated with the seminary claimed that beginning in about 1933 the emphasis of Westminster began to include an attack on their position. Several of the members of the faculty began to present strong criticisms of “Modern Dispensationalism,” particularly in the form which was taught in the notes of the Scofield Reference Bible.³⁰

In the spring of 1936 firm evidence of Westminster’s position on dispensationalism and premillennialism appeared in the pages of the *Presbyterian Guardian*.³¹ John Murray of the department of systematic theology was writing an extended series of articles on “The Reformed Faith and Modern Substitutes.” In the February 3 issue it was announced that “Modern Dispensationalism” would appear in a later issue as one of the “modern substitutes.” But the *Guardian* wanted to make it abundantly clear that Mr. Murray’s articles were not intended in any way to exclude *premillennialists* from Reformed fellowship. The editor of the *Guardian*, H. McAllister Griffiths, who was himself a premillennialist, stressed in the May 4 issue that neither the *Guardian* nor the Presbyterian Constitutional Covenant Union (which it then represented) were opposed to premillennialism as such. Concerning the position of the Reformed faith on the return of Christ, the editorial stated: “Differences over the *mode* in which that return will take place, whether according to the pre-, post-, or a-millennial view, have certainly been historically regarded as being within the area

²⁹ *Presbyterian Guardian* 2 (June 22, 1936), 111.

^{29a} The faculty also included one “historic premillennialist,” Mr. Paul Woolley, who aligned himself with the “Old School” tradition.

³⁰ H. McAllister Griffiths, “The Character and Leadership of Dr. Machen,” *Christian Beacon* 2 (September 2, 1937), 5. Cf. letter from W. Lyall Detlor, *Christian Beacon* 2 (May 20, 1937), 2.

³¹ In January of 1936 Oswald T. Allis, professor of Old Testament at Westminster Seminary, published a similar attack upon modern dispensationalism in *The Evangelical Quarterly*. See “Modern Dispensationalism and the Doctrine of the Unity of Scripture,” reprinted by James Clarke & Co., London, 1936.

of permitted liberty.”³² “The series of articles by Mr. John Murray appearing in the *Guardian*,” the editorial went on, “is emphatically not to be interpreted as an effort to read premillenarians out of the communion of the church.”³³ Murray himself stated that the articles would deal only with that form of dispensationalism “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.”³⁴

When Murray’s article appeared in the next issue, the author confined himself to this position, which he characterized as “Modern Dispensationalism.” His attack was centered on the dispensational scheme present in the popular Scofield Reference Bible, and on the interpretations of dispensationalism presented by Lewis Sperry Chafer in *The Kingdom in History and Prophecy* and by Charles Feinberg in *Pre-millennialism or Amillennialism?* Murray’s thesis was that Modern Dispensationalism “contradicts the teaching of the standards of the Reformed Faith.”³⁵ After contrasting the statements of the dispensationalists and of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Murray concluded: “Herein consists the real seriousness of the dispensationalist scheme. It undermines what is basic and central in Biblical revelation; it destroys the unity of the covenant of grace.”³⁶

The force of Murray’s argument was to demonstrate that dispensationalism teaches that radically opposite, mutually exclusive and destructive principles prevail in the differing dispensations concerned. In the dispensation of law and kingdom the administration of law prevails. In the church age, or the dispensation of grace, it is grace which prevails. And, according to the statement of Feinberg, “God does not have two mutually exclusive principles as law and grace operative in one period.”³⁷ The *Westminster Confession*, on the other hand, teaches that the covenant of grace became operative as a result of the fall, and that it is this same one unified covenant which is administered in the time of the law as well as in the time of the gospel.³⁸ Hence, Murray argued, the dispensational teaching must be inconsistent with the Reformed standards. Murray admitted that dispensationalists might attempt to reconcile their teaching with the Reformed standards by saying that all men in all times were saved by the blood of Christ. But such a position, he maintained, is impossible for the dispensationalist to hold unless he contradicts himself. The Westminster Standards are explicit that the Mosaic dispensation was an administration of the covenant of grace. “The contrast between the two positions is absolute.”³⁹

³² *Guardian* 2 (May 4, 1936), 44.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ John Murray, “The Reformed Faith and Modern Substitutes,” Part VI “Modern Dispensationalism,” *Guardian* 2 (May 18, 1936), 77.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 79.

³⁷ Quoted from Feinberg, *Ibid.*, 79.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

It is certainly striking that this explicit and uncompromising attack upon “Modern Dispensationalism” should appear in the *Guardian* at such a critical moment in the struggle against modernism in the PCUSA. Within less than a month the general assembly of that church was to meet and there was little doubt that the necessary sequel to decisions of that assembly would be the dissolution of the Presbyterian Constitutional Covenant Union and the formation of a new Presbyterian denomination. Yet at this moment of decision the *Guardian*, the voice of the Covenant Union, was speaking out against those who might have been the most numerous of their potential allies! Certainly many dispensationalists who may have been sympathetic with the Covenant Union’s fight against modernism must have been disillusioned by the exclusivism of the new group.

Yet the strong stand against dispensationalism had an important effect upon the character of the new denomination. The PCA was to be explicitly Reformed and to tolerate no doctrines which were considered inconsistent with its standards. It was clear that the doctrinal position of the church was to be dominated by the strict constitutionalism characteristic of the majority of the faculty of Westminster Seminary. On the other hand, the new denomination included within its ranks a minority of premillennialists who feared the implications of such a thoroughgoing attack upon dispensationalism.

The test case came almost as soon as the denomination was organized. The expressly premillennial Duryea (Pennsylvania) Presbyterian Church applied for membership in the Philadelphia Presbytery, which was the center of the amillennialists’ strength. The Duryea Church requested that “full eschatological liberty be granted by the Presbyterian Church of America.”⁴⁰ After an extended debate the Duryea church was finally received into the presbytery at its October meeting. At the same time the presbytery passed a resolution which stated:

The question whether or not our Lord’s bodily return is held to precede the “thousand years” referred to in Revelation 20 is in our opinion, despite its importance, not to be regarded as a test whether a man does or does not adhere to the system of doctrine contained in the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechism.⁴¹

Despite this satisfactory resolution of the Duryea case, the debate over eschatological liberty was beginning to leave its scars. A premillennialist minority felt that the majority’s concessions of “eschatological freedom” were not consistent with their uncompromising and continued attacks upon “Modern Dispensationalism.” The breach became public in the October 1 issue of the Rev. Carl McIntire’s paper, the *Christian Beacon*. The editorial on “Premillennialism” in that issue revealed that the editor disagreed with the policies of the

⁴⁰ *Christian Beacon* 1 (August 20, 1936), 8.

⁴¹ Resolution of the Philadelphia Presbytery, October 13, 1936; *Guardian* 2 (October 24, 1936), 203.

church in the strongest terms. “Why is it necessary even to talk about ‘eschatological liberty?’” asked McIntire,

Such liberty has been recognized. The answer, we believe, is that the a-millennialists have been attacking more strenuously the premillennialists. The premillennialist position has been quite generally accepted by Christian people, and the amillennialists have launched their attack upon it.⁴²

McIntire’s reaction was directed partially toward Murray’s series on “Modern Dispensationalism,” but primarily toward a statement made by R. B. Kuiper, professor of practical theology at Westminster Seminary. Writing in the *Banner* for a Christian Reformed audience, Kuiper had said in reference to the examination of ministerial candidates in the PCA:

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 extremely prevalent among American fundamentalists, Arminianism and the Dispensationalism of the Scofield Bible. The Assembly wanted to make sure that these prospective candidates were not tainted with such anti-reformed heresies.⁴³

Kuiper’s article, which was republished in the *Guardian*, hardly warmed the cockles of the heart of the editor of the *Beacon*. To him a characterization of the dispensationalism of the Scofield Bible as an “anti-reformed heresy” amounted to an attack on all premillennialists. “The remark in regard to the ‘Dispensationalism of the Scofield Bible,’” he wrote, “is an attack upon the premillennialists as heretics.”⁴⁴

Here was the clearest expression of the difference between the two positions. The Westminster Seminary and *Presbyterian Guardian*⁴⁵ group said clearly and repeatedly that their criticism of “Modern Dispensationalism” had nothing to do with premillennialists who did not adopt Scofield’s schemes. The *Beacon* group, on the other hand, felt that such criticism constituted an attack on their own position.

The premillennialists in the PCA never claimed to be “Modern Dispensationalist,” and no one ever charged them with being such. They never claimed to hold, nor were they charged with holding, the entire dispensational scheme of the Scofield Bible. Yet they were convinced that their premillennialism involved a form of dispensationalism. H. McAllister Griffiths wrote a year later:

It is true that there is a bare form of premillennialism in which it is possible to think of the coming of Christ as being prior to the millennium, and to hold that view unrelated to the bulk of the prophecies of the Bible. But I do not know one premillennialist in a hundred who

⁴² *Beacon* 1 (October 1, 1936), 4.

⁴³ R. B. Kuiper, “Why Separation Was Necessary,” *Guardian* 2 (September 12, 1936), 227.

⁴⁴ *Beacon* 1 (October 1, 1936), 4.

⁴⁵ As of September 12, 1936, the editorship of the *Guardian* passed from H. McAllister Griffiths to J. Gresham Machen and Ned B. Stonehouse.

holds such a restricted view. The real premillennialist views the events revealed of the end-time in proportion and perspective, as part of a great, unified unfolding of the various dispensations of God's providence to man.⁴⁶

McIntire viewed the identification of the two positions as even more extensive. With reference to Kuiper's statement he wrote: "His generalized condemnation of the Scofield references leaves no room for the premillenarian to join with Scofield in believing that the millennium is a dispensation.... We are unable to see in our own thinking how the amillennials can say they grant liberty to the Premillenarians and then turn in such a manner as this and condemn them as heretics."⁴⁷ But if Mr. McIntire could not understand the amillennialist's position, the amillennialists were mystified by his line of reasoning. R. B. Kuiper expressed this bewilderment in a lengthy letter to the *Beacon* in which he stated: "It is a matter of common knowledge that there is ever so much more to the Dispensationalism of the Scofield Bible than the mere teaching of Premillennialism. Nor do the two stand or fall together."⁴⁸

The debate on dispensationalism and premillennialism was reaching crisis proportions as the time approached for the Second General Assembly. The Presbytery of California addressed to the assembly a resolution and an overture which expressed complete agreement with the sentiments of McIntire's editorial of October 1. Referring directly to Kuiper's statement, the presbytery resolved that the *Presbyterian Guardian* be requested to cease printing attacks upon dispensationalism or to make it clear that such statements in no way represented the position of the church. On the same grounds the overture requested ". . . that definite, emphatic, and unambiguous eschatological liberty be written into the constitution of our beloved church."⁴⁹

In response to the imminent crisis the issue of the *Guardian* which appeared just prior to the assembly dealt with the millennial question at great length. The leading editorial by Machen set forth clearly the position of the *Guardian* and of the majority of the faculty of Westminster. Machen was sharply critical of McIntire's editorial of October first, which he termed as "misrepresentation."⁵⁰ Further, Machen continued, the refusal of the editor of the *Christian Beacon* to publish Kuiper's reply, despite the insistence of both Kuiper and Machen, has served to create "a rising tide of suspicion and injustice."⁵¹ This new and dangerous attitude could be seen in the overture of the California presbytery.⁵² Hav-

⁴⁶ H. McAllister Griffiths, "The Character and Leadership of Dr. Machen," *Beacon* 2 (September 2, 1937), 2.

⁴⁷ *Beacon* 1 (October 1, 1936), 4.

⁴⁸ Instead of publishing Kuiper's letter in the *Beacon*, McIntire printed a "Correction" in which he apologized for the fact that Kuiper felt misrepresented, saying that the misrepresentation was entirely unintentional, but reaffirming that he still believed that the term "dispensationalism of the Scofield Bible," did include what he said. *Beacon* 1 (October 29, 1936), 4.

⁴⁹ *Guardian* 3 (November 14, 1937), 55.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵² *Ibid.*

ing said this, Machen presented a definition of his own and his associates' position. He stated that they were opposed to anyone who accepts *all* that is taught in the Scofield references, but that it is possible to use some of the notes and still be perfectly Reformed. With regard to premillennialism, he reiterated that he knew of no one of his associates who asserted that premillennialism was incompatible with maintenance of the Reformed system of doctrine.⁵³

Machen saw that the great danger to the church was misunderstanding and consequent misrepresentation. In the interest of relieving this misunderstanding, the *Guardian* published in the same issue an article entitled "A Premillennialist's View" by J. Oliver Buswell, the President of Wheaton College and the best known representative of premillennialism in the church. Buswell's article contributed much toward defining the differences between the two views. He acknowledged that the *Guardian* had never objected to premillennialism as such. Rather, Buswell wrote: "We believe that what is objected to is a denial of the unity of the covenant of grace.... I do not believe that there are any in the Presbyterian Church of America or in our true constituency who really deny the unity of God's redemptive plan...."⁵⁴

Turning to the question of the Scofield references, Buswell indicated his personal feeling, "that the general 'system of doctrine' underlying the dispensationalism of the Scofield Reference Edition of the Bible does not deny the unity of the covenant of grace any more than Hodge denies it."⁵⁵ But Buswell went on to make it clear that he did not agree with everything taught in the notes: "The Scofield notes do teach that the Mosaic order was fundamentally legalistic. This teaching I reject, but I do not believe that those of my friends who regard the Mosaic system as purely a legalistic system are necessarily heretical."⁵⁶ On this point Buswell disagreed expressly with Murray. Murray, he said, was criticizing only the extreme statements of dispensationalists who were so inconsistent as to hold a view that denied the unity of the covenant of grace. Buswell agreed with such a criticism. But he did not feel that it was warranted to use such criticisms of extreme dispensationalists to condemn the moderate form of dispensationalism which holds that law and grace are supplementary. In this connection Buswell argued vigorously that in the administration of God's grace in the Old Testament and in the New Testament age there was "a difference of economy but no difference in principle."⁵⁷

With the appearance of Buswell's article, together with Machen's editorial in the November 14 issue of the *Guardian*, a large step was

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ J. Oliver Buswell, "A Premillennialist's View," Ibid., 46.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 47.

⁵⁷ Ibid. Buswell's emphasis on the continuity of law and grace throughout both the Testaments was consistent with his strict moral position. As he pointed out, a dispensationalism carried to its logical extremes would lead to a denial of the place of the law in the New Testament age: "I feel that to regard the moral law in the Old Testament as in any sense more rigid or binding upon God's people than it is in the New Testament, opens the way for antinomianism, which view I have found at least as prevalent among amillenarians as among premillennarians." (Ibid.)

taken toward an understanding and a truce on the millennium question. Yet at the same time there was already evidence of the emergence of the two other divisive issues. Prior to the Second General Assembly the issue of Christian liberty had not been raised publicly within the PCA. But as early as September 1936 there was evidence of a sharp difference of opinion. As with the issue of premillennialism, the question was raised by the Rev. Carl McIntire in connection with the policies of Westminster Seminary. Westminster Seminary did not have any legislation concerning the use of alcoholic beverages by its students or faculty. Mr. McIntire felt that all consistently Christian institutions should take a strong official stand on this issue. With this concern, and "because of conditions which prevailed and rumors which existed throughout Philadelphia in regard to the Seminary," stated McIntire, he "felt led of God to write to the registrar of the seminary about this matter."⁵⁸ In reply the registrar, Mr. Paul Woolley, observed, "I doubt whether the teaching of the Bible contemplates that there should be enforcement by regulation of this matter in specific cases. Is it not left to each Christian to judge what is temptation to his brother and how he can best avoid putting such in his way?"⁵⁹ For the time being the matter was left to stand at that point. But already the most emotionally charged of the issues had been raised.

Not as emotionally charged but just as volatile was the issue of the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions. When the PCA was founded it established no foreign mission board but continued to support the work of the Independent Board. Prior to the meeting of the Second General Assembly nothing was said publicly within the PCA that would suggest any dissatisfaction with the work of the Board. But already there was general dissatisfaction that was suddenly to develop into an important change in the leadership of the board.

Again it was Carl McIntire who, in the pages of the *Christian Beacon*, first expressed the unrest. And again it was Machen and his associates at Westminster whom he criticized. In this case the criticism was most direct. It appeared in the November 5 *Beacon* in the form of an editorial entitled "A Machine." The editorial observed that there was a "machine" controlling the PCUSA and suggested that the members of the PCA were determined "that no such unpresbyterian and unprotestant thing as a machine should ever develop."⁶⁰ McIntire proceeded to define the characteristics of "machines." These characteristics included such developments as: "A little group of men set themselves up to rule the Church.... They develop a complex in which they feel that their actions are right and that everyone who differs with them should not be in the Church."⁶¹ The editorial gave no indication that anyone thought that there was such a "machine" in the PCA. But subsequent developments soon made it clear just what was McIntire's concern. The PCA, Westminster Theological Seminary, and the Independent Board were all controlled by the same small group. Machen was the acknowl-

⁵⁸ *Beacon* 2 (June 24, 1937), 2.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶⁰ *Beacon* 1 (November 5, 1936), 4.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

edged leader of each of the three organizations, and Machen and his associates controlled the policies of each. In each of the three organizations the premillennialists and the advocates of moral reform were in a minority and had little hope of official sanction for their distinctive opinions. The best the minority could hope for was toleration. And often they felt that it was toleration without respect.

When the Second General Assembly met on November 14, 1936, talk about a "machine" appeared to be little more than vague complaint. Everyone knew there were in the church two groups, resembling parties, which were clearly divided over several distinct issues. But most evident at the assembly were the efforts at reconciliation and the attempts to reestablish mutual understanding and confidence. The election of the new moderator marked the high point in the display of renewed harmony. As soon as the nominations were opened Dr. Cornelius Van Til of Westminster Seminary rose to his feet and nominated the most prominent member of the opposing party, Dr. J. Oliver Buswell. The nomination was seconded by Carl McIntire, and Buswell easily carried the day.⁶²

But the true test of the unity of the new denomination came with the question of adopting the constitution. Two major issues were involved in this question. The first issue was that of the 1903 amendments. The committee on the constitution, headed by Ned B. Stonehouse of Westminster, advised that the amendments were Arminian in character and should be eliminated. McIntire, again the principal spokesman for the opposition, admitted that the 1903 revisions were "weak" in themselves, but that the 1936 version of the constitution of the PCUSA should be adopted in the interest of claiming "direct succession" in the civil suits for church property.⁶³ At the time McIntire himself was engaged in a struggle to retain the valuable church property in Collingswood, New Jersey, and there is no evidence that he or his followers wanted to keep the 1903 amendments for their doctrinal merits.⁶⁴

After a lively discussion, the proposal to include the 1903 amendments was lost and the center of attention turned to the more explosive issue of premillennialism. In this case the specific question was the overture of the Presbytery of California that "eschatological liberty" be written into the constitution. In response to the efforts at mediation in the November 14 issue of the *Guardian*, the Presbytery of California had addressed a conciliatory letter to the assembly clarifying its position. In this letter they apologized for having "pierced to the heart some brethren" and acknowledged with thankfulness that their interpretation of Professor Kuiper's words had been a misrepresentation.⁶⁵

A series of proposals for amendments to the report of the committee

⁶² "The Second General Assembly," *Guardian* 3 (November 28, 1936), 78-79.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁶⁴ As evidence that he favored the eventual elimination of the revisions by constitutional amendment procedure, McIntire noted later that the Bible Presbyterian Synod eliminated these revisions from its constitution. *Beacon* 20 (March 10, 1955), 2.

⁶⁵ Minutes of the Second General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of America, 16-17.

on the constitution followed. An overture from the Presbytery of New Jersey had asked merely for a resolution (which would have no constitutional standing) stating that there should be absolute liberty in the church regarding the millennium. Also, the Rev. Milo Jamison of the Presbytery of California proposed that this liberty should be expressed in a declaratory statement. Both the moderator, J. Oliver Buswell, and the former moderator, J. Gresham Machen, spoke against all such proposals. Buswell declared that the standards of the church should stand by themselves and that no resolution should be adopted which would make it appear that the premillennialists belonged to the outer court of the church.⁶⁶ Machen argued that the church should “start absolutely clean” by adopting the best form of the Westminster Standards and nothing more.⁶⁷ After prolonged debate the report of the committee on the constitution was adopted with no amendments, and two proposals for resolutions on eschatological liberty were withdrawn.⁶⁸

Not all were by any means satisfied with the outcome of the debate. The Presbytery of California protested the assembly’s action because of “the wide-spread and well-founded fears which are abroad that Premillennialists are not welcome in the Presbyterian Church of America.”⁶⁹ Machen’s estimate of the Second General Assembly, expressed editorially in the next issue of the *Guardian*, claimed confidence that the church would weather the storm. Machen praised the work of the assembly and went out of his way to commend the work of the moderator. Machen, however, did criticize the attitude of some of the opposition: “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.” “But ... in general,” Machen added, “the faults of this Assembly were youthful faults.”⁷⁰

But while the activities of the anti-“machine” elements appeared harmless enough within the church itself, Machen had already discovered that his leadership was being challenged in another sphere. Immediately following the Second General Assembly the Independent Board met for the election of officers and the anti-“machine” group took the opportunity to assert their power on a new front.

Machen had been President of the board since its inception in 1933, and at the board meeting in November 1936 his name was again placed in nomination. But the opposition was no longer content to have the same man, or group of men, controlling every organization. With this interest they nominated Harold S. Laird, pastor of the First Independent Church of Wilmington, Delaware, in opposition to Machen. After hours of debate Laird was elected. At the same time Merrill T. MacPherson, also an independent, was reelected vice-president, leaving the eight-man executive committee of the board

⁶⁶ *Beacon* 1 (November 26, 1936), 5.

⁶⁷ *Guardian* 3 (November 28, 1936), 82.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Minutes of the Second General Assembly, 26-27.

⁷⁰ *Guardian* 3 (November 28, 1936), 70-71.

evenly divided between members and non-members of the PCA.⁷¹

Machen is reported to have been deeply concerned by this action. The Rev. Charles J. Woodbridge, the general secretary of the board, stated that Dr. Machen had said to him on the evening of the board elections, "If it were not for our missionaries I would at once resign from the Board."⁷² The Rev. Samuel J. Allen reported that shortly before his death Machen had told him, "There is nothing now that we can do but organize a board in our own church, if true Presbyterian missionaries are to be sent out and Reformed doctrine propagated."⁷³ How Machen would have handled the delicate relations between the Independent Board and the PCA must remain in the realm of speculation. Machen was a remarkable diplomat as well as a highly respected leader, and it is conceivable that he could have used his prestige to heal the breach. With the absence of Machen's leadership such programs of mediation were to prove impossible. As the year ended he lay dying in a North Dakota hospital.

The Year of Division

The magnitude of the crisis created in the Presbyterian Church of America by the death of J. Gresham Machen on the first day of 1937 is difficult to estimate. No one approached him in prestige or influence in the three institutions which were associated with his name.

Without Machen there was first of all a crisis in leadership. The majority of the men who had associated with Machen were younger men—mostly in their thirties. None had the stature or respect required to assume anything approaching Machen's position of leadership. The controversies which developed during 1936 had already divided his followers. His towering influence was a major force in maintaining the unity of the movement. Without him there was no one person who could effectively check the divisive influences. The magnitude of the crisis can be seen best in the speed of developments within each of the three institutions after Machen's death. In the space of six months all three institutions—the Presbyterian Church of America, Westminster Seminary, and the Independent Board—would be divided and in the sole possession of one or the other of the parties which had followed Machen.

A period of relative calm followed the shock of Machen's death. Time was needed to grasp the implications of the new situation and to determine how to proceed. But a storm had been developing in the midst of the calm. Early in 1937 J. Oliver Buswell had published two volumes in his "Lamb of God" series. Volume four of the series dealt

⁷¹ *Guardian* 3 (November 14, 1936), 71.

⁷² Charles J. Woodbridge, "Why I have Resigned as General Secretary of the Independent Board," *Guardian* 4 (June 12, 1937), 69.

⁷³ "Foreign Missions Forge Ahead in the Presbyterian Church of America," *ibid.*, (supplement).

with *The Christian Life*, and Volume five was entitled *Unfulfilled Prophecies*. In these works Buswell discussed at some length both the question of the millennium in relation to dispensationalism and the question of Christian liberty. In its February 27 issue the *Presbyterian Guardian* challenged him on both points.

The editor of the *Guardian*, Ned B. Stonehouse, addressed himself to the question of "Godliness and Christian Liberty." Stonehouse first appealed to the tradition of Presbyterianism as regards total abstinence from the use of tobacco and wine. "Among Presbyterians," he wrote, ". . . there has been a free recognition of the rights of other Christians to follow the dictates of their own consciences in matters where the Bible has not pronounced judgment."^{73a} After appealing to Scripture in defense of his position, Stonehouse turned his attack toward Buswell's book. Citing the fact that Jesus produced large quantities of wine at Cana, Stonehouse observed: "Consequently, it is a serious reflection on our Lord to hold that moderate drinking inevitably leads men into a life of drunkenness, as Dr. Buswell seems to do in his recent book on *The Christian Life*, p. 88."⁷⁴

Buswell's argument in *The Christian Life* had been that: although "the Bible does not explicitly teach total abstinence;" and although it might be proper to use alcohol "in a settled civilization where moderation had forcefully been taught for many years and where the customs of the people were relatively stable;" we in our modern "speed-machine world" where we have no well-established social inhibitions should practice total abstinence.⁷⁵ Today, he argued, "many men can avoid drunkenness only through total abstinence."⁷⁶ Hence Christians should not even drink in moderation lest they lead young people into drunkenness. Buswell concluded his argument with this warning: "You, my friend, whoever you are, even with your emphasis upon orthodoxy, are guilty of the blood and souls of young men and women if by your advocacy and example of moderate drinking you lead them, as you are leading them, into a life of drunkenness."⁷⁷

In response to this argument Stonehouse observed that the Bible very seriously condemned drunkenness. It did this, he argued, because "*the Bible was written in a time when men were wont to go to excess as well as today.*"⁷⁸ The Christian, Stonehouse said, must be very careful not to lead anyone into the sin of drunkenness. But although the Bible urges us to give up our liberty in the interest of the weaker brother at some times, "Paul does not *in every instance* call upon Christians to sacrifice their liberty."⁷⁹ Hence, he concluded, "The use which a Christian makes of his right belongs not to the church or to any other person, but only to himself."⁸⁰

^{73a} *Guardian* 3 (February 27, 1937), 201.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., *The Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1937), 86.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁷⁸ *Guardian* 3 (February 27, 1937), 202.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 204.

Coordinated with this strong criticism of Dr. Buswell's views on "the separated life," the *Guardian* published an equally critical evaluation of his eschatology. The attack was no longer directed toward "Modern Dispensationalism," which Buswell repudiated; but now it was directed explicitly against his *defense of premillennialism*. The criticism, entitled "Dr. Buswell's Premillennialism," by John Murray, took the form of a review of *Unfulfilled Prophecies*. This book was itself polemic in character. In this short study Buswell defended premillennialism; but he did it largely through a criticism of the eschatological views of prominent defenders of amillennialism and postmillennialism, specifically Geerhardus Vos and B. B. Warfield. Buswell noted in his Preface that he stood ready to be thoroughly corrected in his criticism of such distinguished scholars.⁸¹ But he could hardly have been ready for the thorough censure which appeared in Murray's review.

After some preliminary remarks commending certain characteristics of Buswell's premillennial position, Murray proceeded to expound the main thesis of his review: that "Dr. Buswell grossly misrepresents both Dr. Warfield and Dr. Vos, but particularly the latter."⁸² Pointing out several instances in *Unfulfilled Prophecies* where he believed this to be the case, Murray commented: "We do not accuse Dr. Buswell of deliberate distortion. He has, however, shown himself seriously incompetent to deal carefully and fairly with his opponent."⁸³ The effect of Murray's analysis was to say that he had very little respect for Dr. Buswell as an exegete. At one point he even accused Buswell of falling into an "unscholarly error" by using an English concordance in an argument where a Greek concordance was required. In conclusion Murray admitted: "Dr. Buswell's eschatological position is much saner and therefore more defensible than that of many premillennialists."⁸⁴ But, he said, he found the book "exceedingly disappointing. It is characterized by gross unfairness and misrepresentation, and his exegetical argumentation is frequently inconsequential."⁸⁵

Buswell was highly disturbed by the *Guardian's* two-pronged attack upon his distinctive views. In response Buswell addressed two communications to the *Guardian* which appeared in the April 10 issue. The first was a brief communication protesting that his argument for total abstinence in *The Christian Life* was based solely upon the biblical principle of inexpediency found in 1 Corinthians 6:12 and 10:23.⁸⁶ The second was an extended reply to Murray's review. Buswell stated that the differences between him and Murray were "within the bounds of Christian comity." Nevertheless, he said, "My whole point is that even such orthodox scholars, including Mr. Murray, do not argue against the millennium without involving themselves in contradictions and inconsistencies."⁸⁷ Buswell proceeded to make a point-by-point

⁸¹ Buswell, *Unfulfilled Prophecies* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1937), Preface.

⁸² Murray, "Dr. Buswell's Premillennialism," *Guardian* 3 (February 27, 1937), 206.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 207.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Letter from Buswell, *Guardian* 4 (April 10, 1937), 12.

⁸⁷ Buswell's reply to Murray, *Ibid.*, 13.

defense of his statements which Murray had criticized, including the observation that he had a large Greek concordance at his elbow in his study. In the most part Buswell's defense was careful and scholarly. But it concluded with four brief paragraphs which the editors of the *Guardian* refused to publish since they felt that they would impugn the motive of the receiver and were misleading in certain respects.⁸⁸

In the same issue the editors printed Murray's reply to this communication. In this reply Murray reiterated and clarified some of his criticisms. He concluded with some observations regarding Dr. Buswell's personal feelings:

He may have thought I was indulging in a personal attack and so may some readers. May I disabuse all concerned of such a notion. I am not without admiration for many excellent qualities in Dr. Buswell... It is surely by forthright criticism, where such is necessary, that the cause of truth is to be advanced.⁸⁹

While the young faculty members of Westminster were debating with Dr. Buswell concerning his recently published views, the old issue of toleration of dispensationalism was raised from outside the new denomination. *The Sunday School Times* of February 20, 1937, revived the charge that the leaders of the PCA were hostile to premillennial views.⁹⁰ In response to this charge, the editor of the *Guardian* stated once again that the attack upon "Modern Dispensationalism" did not constitute a criticism of premillennialism. In order to clarify the amillennial position of Westminster Seminary, the *Guardian* promised a study of that subject in an early issue.⁹¹

The *Guardian* of March 27, 1937, fulfilled this promise by publishing an article by John Murray entitled "What is Amillennialism?" This article had nothing of a polemic character but was a careful and patient explanation of the amillennial position directed toward a premillennialist audience. The intent of the article was to encourage the premillennialist readers to at least understand the amillennialist's position, even if they could not accept his conclusions.⁹²

By mid-April 1937 the divisive issues were clearly defined and before the public. None of these issues involved a disagreement on a central point of Christian doctrine. But the extent of the disagreement on these various subjects had created parties in the church and in its associated institutions. Even in 1936 the two parties had been attempting to consolidate their power and to gain leadership. In 1937, with the death of Machen, this question of leadership was magnified. The result was a struggle for control in each of the three institutions—the seminary, the Independent Board, and the denomination. In each the pattern of the struggle was the same: the minority became acutely dissatisfied with their lack of influence; they

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁸⁹ Murray's reply to Buswell, *ibid.*, 16.

⁹⁰ *The Sunday School Times*, Vol. 79, No. 8, pp. 130–32.

⁹¹ *Guardian* 3 (March 13, 1937), 217–21.

⁹² John Murray, "What is Amillennialism?" *Guardian* 3 (March 27, 1937), 242–45.

appealed to the majority for a reform—or more correctly, a concession to their position; the appeal was rejected; the minority withdrew and formed a rival institution.

Ever since the formation of the PCA the minority in the church had been dissatisfied with the policies of Westminster Seminary. In the fall of 1936 J. Oliver Buswell had submitted to Machen an extensive critique of Westminster, which Machen had never found opportunity to answer.⁹³ With the death of Machen the dissatisfaction with Westminster increased rapidly.

In April of 1937 Carl McIntire took matters into his own hands and approached the faculty of Westminster personally on the matter of the use of alcoholic beverages. At the faculty meeting of April 24 McIntire appealed to the faculty that they should counsel their brethren in the matter of total abstinence. As he may well have expected, the faculty maintained its position that this was a matter of personal liberty both for themselves and for their brethren.⁹⁴

The minority also made an attempt to reform the eschatological position of the seminary, suggesting that it add three faculty members and ten trustees, all of whom were premillennialists, so as to achieve a balance of power. This suggestion too was discarded by the majority, who maintained that such was not an adequate basis for the selection of the faculty or of trustees.⁹⁵ Two days later the division of the seminary became a reality with the resignation of the professor of Old Testament, Allan A. MacRae. In his letter of resignation MacRae explained that he was compelled to take this step because: "Control of the faculty had passed into the hands of a small alien group without American Presbyterian background."⁹⁶ "The major emphasis of the teaching of the Seminary," he continued ... has now shifted so that it is no longer primarily against Modernism, but against Fundamentalism, so called."⁹⁷ In support of this contention, MacRae cited the two issues of a sustained attack on premillennialism in the seminary, and the vigorous defense of their right to use intoxicating liquors on the part of almost every member of the faculty.⁹⁸ Two of the members of the board of trustees, Harold S. Laird and Roy Talmage Brumbaugh, resigned at the same time as MacRae, offering much the same reasons for their action.⁹⁹

The *Beacon* commented on the division in an editorial entitled "Liquor." "We are very very sorry that the attack of Westminster Seminary has shifted to the Fundamentalists," wrote McIntire.¹⁰⁰ McIntire viewed the matter of Christian liberty to be the major issue in the division; but he also saw the position of the seminary on this matter

⁹³ Stonehouse, *Machen*, 504.

⁹⁴ *Beacon* 2 (June 24, 1937), 2. Cf. letter from Paul Woolley, *Beacon* 2 (July 1, 1937), 2.

⁹⁵ Statement of R. B. Kuiper, chairman of the faculty, *Guardian* 4 (May 15, 1937), 39.

⁹⁶ Allan A. MacRae, Letter of Resignation from Westminster Seminary, April 26, 1937; *Ibid.*, 50.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Beacon* 2 (April 29, 1937), 1-2.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

as an excuse for an attack upon fundamentalism in general. Thus he wrote: "Because this matter has been injected into this movement at this time, together with other matters which are minor in comparison to the great issue of the day, we see the utter folly of the seminary leadership. It has lost its effective leadership."¹⁰¹

The faculty at Westminster felt that the charge that the seminary had ceased firing upon modernism to turn its guns against fundamentalism was "preposterous."¹⁰² Rather, they maintained, they were devoted solely to the Reformed faith, reiterating their position on the issues of premillennialism and Christian liberty.¹⁰³ Nevertheless, the unity of the seminary had been shattered. No realistic proposals for compromise had been offered on either side. Not that the issues involved were essential to the central message of the institution; the seminary had been divided into parties, and one of the parties had gained complete control. The minority, whose position was not represented in the official statements of the seminary, withdrew with the intention of forming a rival seminary which represented their own views.

And what about the Independent Board? Ever since the defeat of Machen in his bid for reelection to the presidency of the Independent Board, the Westminster group had been concerned about their loss of leadership in that organization. With the death of Machen they became a minority on the executive committee as well as on the board itself. Their fear was that the opposition would use their power on the board to substitute new policies, such as taking an official stand in favor of premillennialism or total abstinence.

The men at Westminster had already seen that such a development was a real possibility. Merrill T. MacPherson, the vice-president of the Independent Board, was also the president of an organization known as the Philadelphia Fundamentalists. Meeting on February 4, 1937, the Philadelphia Fundamentalists amended their constitution to include a definite premillennial statement which excluded non-premillennialists from its membership. In response to this action, Mr. Paul Woolley of Westminster Seminary, an historic premillennialist, withdrew from the organization.¹⁰⁴

The presence of MacPherson on the Independent Board was disturbing to the Westminster group. His ardent premillennialism was based on a form of dispensationalism. Presumably they could have challenged his orthodoxy in an attempt to remove him from the board. But the Westminster group employed a different tack in approaching the problem. MacPherson, as well as several other members of the board, including its president, were independents. The constitution of the board was clearly Presbyterian in character. They therefore decided to challenge the legality of having independents on a board for Presbyterian foreign mis-

¹⁰¹ Ibid. It should be observed that McIntire himself had a considerable role in raising the issue of drinking at Westminster.

¹⁰² *Guardian* 4 (May 15, 1937), 37.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 37-40.

¹⁰⁴ *Guardian* 4 (February 27, 1937), 214.

sions. To do this they had to insert a new issue into the controversy—that of independency.

The issue of independency was raised in the May 15, 1937, issue of the *Guardian*. Ned B. Stonehouse, the editor, wrote:

Presbyterianism is distinguished from Independentism in that it maintains, to use the word of Charles Hodge, “the unity of the church, in such sense, that a small part is subject to a larger, and a larger to the whole” (*Church Polity*, p. 119). . . . Apart from the interdependence of the churches, which the New Testament everywhere recognizes, the task of the church, which is to proclaim the Word of God, cannot be carried out, nor can the purity of the church be maintained in any adequate fashion.¹⁰⁵

When the Independent Board met on May 31, just prior to the Third General Assembly, the minority presented a resolution to the board disapproving of independency of church government and calling upon the independents to bring their practice into accord with the charter.¹⁰⁶ The charter of the Independent Board stated that its purpose was to promote mission work “which is true to the Bible and the system of doctrine contained in the Westminster Confession of Faith and to the fundamental principles of Presbyterian church government.”¹⁰⁷ The charter of the board did not state explicitly that its members had to be Presbyterians or even subscribe directly to the fundamental principles of Presbyterian church government. However, it did state that its members had to pledge approval of the charter of the board.¹⁰⁸ The authors of the resolution argued that by making such a pledge the board member was “indicating his approval of the foregoing provisions of the charter.”¹⁰⁹ Appended to this resolution was formal notice that if the resolution were passed its signers would undertake an investigation of the doctrinal soundness of certain members.¹¹⁰

A stormy session followed the introduction of this resolution. The emotion generated by the disruption of the institution which Machen had founded and strenuously defended was intense. Carl McIntire claimed that at one point in the meeting one of the women associated with the Westminster group “turned to the majority of the Board and declared, ‘The death of Dr. Machen is on your hands.’ The Westminster group and other women nodded assent,” added McIntire.¹¹¹

When the resolutions failed, eight of the board members, including four connected with Westminster Seminary, resigned on the grounds “that the usefulness of the Independent Board as an agency to promote the object for which it was founded, the conduct of truly Presbyterian foreign missions, is at an end.”¹¹² At the same time six of the missionaries

¹⁰⁵ *Guardian* 4 (May 15, 1937), 39.

¹⁰⁶ *Guardian* 4 (June 6, 1937), 79.

¹⁰⁷ The Charter of the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions; *ibid.*, 79.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁰⁹ Resolution to the Independent Board, *ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Beacon* 2 (June 3, 1937), 5.

¹¹² Letter of Resignation; *Guardian* 4 (June 6, 1937), 80.

under appointment by the board requested cancellation of their appointments.¹¹³ Also, the Rev. Charles J. Woodbridge resigned as the general secretary of the board. In defense of his action Woodbridge explained that the board was no longer true to its charter and that the executive committee which appointed the missionaries was controlled by three independents and one elder in the PCUSA. Woodbridge noted that, "It has been widely rumored that the issue throughout has been one of Premillennialism *versus* Amillennialism."¹¹⁴ But this could not be the case, he argued, because at least three of the members of the board who had resigned (including himself) were premillennialists. Independency and its implications for the future work of the board were the only issues.¹¹⁵

The majority on the board insisted that the action of the minority was merely an excuse to divide the board so that the PCA would be free to establish its own mission board, controlled by the Westminster interests. "It seems that the men were looking for an excuse on which to base their action," wrote McIntire in the *Beacon*, "and the best excuse they could get, and without doubt one of the most flimsy, was the fact that the Board was in favor of Independency."¹¹⁶ The charge that the board favored independency was simply not true, argued McIntire. As evidence of this he noted: first, the board did pass a resolution in which it fully reaffirmed its adherence to its charter and to Presbyterian doctrine and polity; second, the new members which were elected to the board were all Presbyterians; third, the board simply tabled the motion of the minority, which did not in any way constitute approval of independency."¹¹⁷

Harold S. Laird, the president of the board, added several arguments in support of the majority's contention. First, he pointed out that no charge was made that the board intended to send out missionaries who were untrue to Scripture, and no specific case of doctrinal irregularities was cited. The only charge was that three members were practicing independency. Second, Laird stated that the three members in question were wholeheartedly devoted to Presbyterian doctrine and to the fundamental principles of Presbyterian church government, and that they were independents only because they could not conscientiously join any existing denomination. Third, he pointed out that in 1935 the Rev. Milo F. Jamison, who was then an independent, was unanimously elected to the board, and no question was raised by anyone as to his ability to take the pledge in all sincerity."¹¹⁸

Regardless of any evaluation of the motives of the minority or the strength of their contention, their action certainly had something to do with their conviction that it was necessary to create a denominational mission board. Close cooperation between those who

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Woodbridge, "Why I have Resigned . . ." Ibid., 69.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 70.

¹¹⁶ *Beacon* 2 (June 3, 1937), 4.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Harold S. Laird, "The Independent Board Carries on Despite New Attacks," *The Independent Board Bulletin* 3 (June 1937), 3-10.

controlled the church and those who controlled the Independent Board was no longer feasible. Under any circumstances they would have had to withdraw from the Independent Board before they established their own agency.

The pattern in the division of the Independent Board was essentially the same as that in the division of Westminster Seminary. The minority felt that a new institution was necessary if they were to propagate effectively their distinctive views. They proposed a reform which they knew the majority would not accept. (The minority on the board could hardly have expected the majority to pass a resolution which would have required the independents of their number to affiliate with a Presbyterian denomination.) When their proposal was rejected the minority withdrew.

With the withdrawal of the Westminster group from the Independent Board, the division of the PCA at its Third General Assembly seemed inevitable. The minority could hardly remain in a denomination which conducted missions in competition with the board they supported. Here again the pattern of division would be essentially the same. The minority recognized that their situation was hopeless and that a new institution was necessary if they were to have an effective voice in governing their denomination. The issue on which they could urge reform was that of total abstinence. Several overtures on this subject had already been made to the assembly. The majority was almost certain to reject such overtures; and this together with the other divisive factors would be sufficient to divide the denomination.

That a division of the church was imminent became apparent early in the first session of the assembly. At that time, according to the *Guardian's* report, "Dr. Buswell openly declared his intention to withdraw ... if the Assembly did not take what he considered to be the only proper action on the overtures involving the question of total abstinence."¹¹⁹ But the first major item of business was the report of the committee on Foreign Missions, and the question of the church's relation to the Independent Board. The report recommended that, since the Independent Board was no longer true to its charter, it had now become necessary for the PCA to establish its own foreign missionary agency.¹²⁰

In reply Carl McIntire presented an extensive minority report recommending that the church not change its mission program. McIntire reviewed in detail the charges against the board and the defense of the majority. The majority on the Independent Board, his report stated, still belonged to the PCA. Furthermore, "It should be remembered that the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. functioned for forty-nine years without any Board of its own, but authorized the sending of its gifts even to an agency which was congregational, the American Board of Foreign Missions...."¹²¹

¹¹⁹ *Guardian* 4 (June 26, 1937), 88.

¹²⁰ "Report of the Foreign Mission Committee," Minutes of the Third General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of America, 16.

¹²¹ "Minority Report," *Ibid.*, 15. Here McIntire was appealing to the same practice which

The debate on the reports was lengthy and sometimes heated. Speaking against the motion, J. Oliver Buswell protested, "These men who are attacked in the majority report were good enough for the Board till other matters came up."¹²² He insisted that neither the question of independency nor eschatology entered into the matter at all. Rather, he asserted, the two issues were a "little clique" that wanted to run everything and opposition to total abstinence.¹²³ After several speeches by members of the majority, McIntire in a final speech again alleged that it was a "little clique" which was causing all the trouble.¹²⁴

At last the assembly rejected the minority report by a vote of 75 to 19.¹²⁵ The defeated minority filed a protest to this action, reaffirming their defense of the Independent Board. In answer to this protest the majority stated that the assembly had based its action directly on the voted action of the Independent Board in refusing to adopt the resolution condemning independency. The action of the general assembly was, therefore, based solely on the fact that the board was no longer true to its charter, and reflected no adverse judgment on the merits of the work of the board or the integrity of its members.¹²⁶

The intensity of the debate increased as the attention of the assembly was turned from foreign missions to the subject of Christian liberty. The issue before the assembly was also before the public in the simplest terms. The daily newspapers had already printed Buswell's statement that the PCA was a "wet" church.¹²⁷ Some declaration had to be made by the general assembly to clarify the stand of the church on this controversial issue.

Three overtures urged that the church either recommend or resolve that its members practice total abstinence. One overture, from the Presbytery of Philadelphia, resolved that only the relevant statement of the *Westminster Catechisms* be brought to the attention of the members of the church. The debate on the floor centered on two proposals. The minority chose to defend the overture of the Presbytery of the Chicago Area recommending total abstinence; while the majority united behind a substitute which expanded the Philadelphia overture.

The overture from the Presbytery of the Chicago Area was an extended appeal to "historic American Presbyterianism." Within the text of the overture were quoted seven recommendations for total abstinence which had been adopted by the PCUSA in the nineteenth century.^{127a} The overture resolved that the PCA adopt the declara-

the New School had defended in 1837.

¹²² *Guardian* 4 (June 26, 1937), 89.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 89-91.

¹²⁶ "Report of the Committee Appointed to Answer the Protests," *Minutes of the Third General Assembly*, 5-7.

¹²⁷ *Guardian* 4 (June 26, 1937), 94.

^{127a} *Guardian* 33 (January 1964), 7-8.

tion which had been first adopted by the New School assembly in 1840 and reconfirmed by the reunited assemblies in 1877. It also recommended to all the members of the church "... unvarying exemplification of the only true principle of temperance—total abstinence from anything that will intoxicate."¹²⁸

The substitute to the Philadelphia overture proposed the opposite extreme—that the assembly do nothing more than affirm its belief in the statements of its standards. It stated:

We believe that the Westminster standards speak with adequacy and with force on these subjects, in the Confession of Faith XX; Larger Catechism, Questions 122–148; and Shorter Catechism, Questions 63–81.... We do not feel that any situation has actually arisen within the Presbyterian Church of America which calls for any further statement.¹²⁹

Each side had chosen to defend the most extreme statement of their position. In the lengthy debate which followed there was little concord. Each side appealed to Scripture, the tradition of American Presbyterianism, the practice or convictions of J. Gresham Machen, and to the situation at Westminster Seminary. At the end of the debate the resolution for total abstinence was lost and the substitute to the Philadelphia overture was carried by a large majority. With the loss of their motion, Milo F. Jamison and J. Oliver Buswell expressed their intention to leave the denomination.¹³⁰

Immediately following the Third General Assembly fourteen ministers and three elders withdrew from the church and announced their intention to form the Bible Presbyterian Synod. In the subsequent months the various presbyteries and individual churches who had represented the minority allied themselves with the new organization.

Although the division was generally considered tragic because of the effects it might have upon the witness of the movement, many of the participants agreed that the dissension had reached the point where division was the best solution. Edwin H. Rian of the majority stated, "Their exodus is a happy solution."¹³¹ Carl McIntire commented, "We are thankful to God that He made it so clear in such a short time the real position of the men who are now in Westminster Seminary."¹³² The statement most often used in defense of the division expressed far more than the reiteration of the divisive issues themselves. The statement came from Amos 3:3—"Can two walk together except they be agreed?"

With their independence established, the members of the Bible Presbyterian Synod proceeded to enact the policies which had been denied them in the PCA. They already had control of the Independent Board, which they continued to support in its foreign mission program. In

¹²⁸ "Overture #2, Presbytery of the Chicago Area," *Minutes of the Third General Assembly*, 5–7.

¹²⁹ *Minutes*, 22.

¹³⁰ *Guardian* 4 (June 26, 1937), 94.

¹³¹ *Beacon* 2 (June 10, 1937), 8.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 4.

the fall of 1937 they opened Faith Theological Seminary to represent their distinctive views. Finally, at the first meeting of the Bible Presbyterian Synod in 1938 the new denomination took an official stand on eschatology and on total abstinence. On eschatology, the new synod adopted the Westminster Standards without the revisions of 1903 but with an explicit statement of a premillennialist position. At the same time they passed a resolution which allowed eschatological liberty within the denomination.¹³³ On abstinence, the synod adopted a relatively mild statement, declaring “that we deem it wise to pursue a course of total abstinence.”¹³⁴

Conclusions

In evaluating the causes of the division of the Presbyterian Church of America in 1937 two explanations are most often given. The first is that it was caused by differences over the theological issues involved. The second is that it was a matter of politics and personalities.

If we were to adopt the first of these explanations—that the division was caused by differences on eschatology, Christian liberty, and church polity—we would have to answer the question: was any one of these issues sufficient to divide the church? And if so, which one? Certainly the differences on eschatology could hardly be considered sufficient cause for the division. Neither the premillennialists nor the amillennialists ever claimed that the other position should not be tolerated within the church. The closely related issue of modern dispensationalism might have been considered a sufficient cause for division. But that issue was never officially raised within the denomination.

Likewise, the issue of church polity could not be a sufficient cause for the division. No one who joined a Presbyterian denomination could be charged with practicing independency; and so the question of independency as such was never raised within the church. Nor could the question of denominational support of the Independent Board be considered primarily a matter of principle. No one ever claimed that denominational missions were wrong. And certainly no one who had followed Machen out of the PCUSA claimed that Christians did not have a right to conduct non-denominational missions.

This leaves only the issue of Christian liberty—specifically the question of whether the church should officially recommend total abstinence from alcoholic beverages. J. Oliver Buswell and others maintained that the failure to take an explicit stand on this question was sufficient cause to leave the denomination. The merits of this position are a matter of continuing debate. But if this were the sole and sufficient cause for the division, it would seem necessary to establish either that a church which fails to take an official stand on this question can no longer be a true church of Christ, or that members have the right to leave a denomination over an issue less than that of apostasy.

¹³³ *Beacon* 3 (September 15, 1938), 1.

¹³⁴ *Beacon* 3 (September 8, 1938), 4.

The second explanation of the division is that it was not caused primarily by the differences on theological issues, but that it was the result of a contest for ecclesiastical power and the clash of personalities. On the one hand, it has been claimed that a "machine" dominated by Westminster Seminary was trying to seize control of everything connected with the denomination. On the other hand, 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.

Certainly there is an element of truth in each of these claims. The policies of the PCA were controlled by a relatively small group of men closely associated with Westminster Seminary. And Carl McIntire objected vigorously to the extent of that control. The result was a contest for leadership, which centered in the struggle to control the Independent Board. That this contest was largely political in character can be seen by a consideration of the major move made by each side. On the one hand, no one has ever claimed that Laird was elected to replace Machen as president of the Independent Board because he would be superior to Machen as a leader or administrator. Rather, he was elected as the representative of a party. On the other hand, one can hardly imagine that the issue of the independency of certain members of the board would have been pressed as it was, if the question of control of the board had not been involved. From a practical point of view this contest for control of the Independent Board was the single most important factor in dividing the church.

But once it is conceded that there was a major political factor involved, it does not necessarily follow that the division was caused solely by political considerations or by personal antagonisms. Certainly the strained personal and political relationships could have been vastly improved if either side had been willing to be tolerant on the principles involved.

These two explanations of the division, if taken together, are helpful, but not entirely satisfactory. They become more satisfactory if they are viewed in the light of a third consideration—that the division represented a conflict of the two major traditions in American Presbyterianism. This third explanation was intimated at the time of the division in the claims of each side that the other had departed from "historic Presbyterianism." On the one side this division was sometimes represented as a conflict between "historic Presbyterianism" and "fundamentalism"; while on the other side it was termed "historic American Presbyterianism" *versus* a non-American (Dutch and Scottish) Reformed tradition. Neither of these representations is totally accurate; but they do support the contention of the present study that the division reflected a conflict of two traditions within conservative Presbyterianism in America.

This explanation in itself is not sufficient to explain the division. If

it were, it would have to be established that the two traditions within American Presbyterianism were incompatible. This would be difficult to establish in the light of the facts that both of the two previous divisions (Old Side—New Side in 1741 and Old School—New School in 1837) were resolved within a generation (1758 and 1869); and that from 1869 to 1936 the two sides cooperated closely within the PCUSA. Nevertheless, the observation that the division reflected a conflict between two American Presbyterian traditions is extremely useful in broadening our perspective on the events of 1937.

The two traditions do not represent two incompatible theological traditions. Rather, they represent two approaches to the same tradition. One is the more subjective, less authoritarian conception of Presbyterianism, closely associated with nineteenth-century revivalism and twentieth-century “fundamentalism” with their strong emphases on the visible signs of faith, especially a conversion “experience” and a “separated life.” The other is the more objective and authoritarian conception, closely associated with the European Reformed tradition with its strong emphasis on the place of the objective standards and often associated with exacting scholarship. Each of these traditions has always included many of the traits more strongly characteristic of the other.

These two emphases were both found within the PCA and corresponded closely to the two sides of the division of 1937. One observer characterized this difference as being similar to the difference between the sales and the research departments of a modern industry. The sales department is anxious to get the product on the market even if the product is not yet in its most perfect state; while the research department insists that caution should be taken not to present a shoddy product. Often one side has a difficult time understanding the emphasis of the other, even though each one has a legitimate function.¹³⁵

The analogy is useful because it helps to explain the apparent breakdown of communications in the early months of 1937. Each side had a vision of what the new church should be like. The minority saw a Bible-believing church witnessing to the world both in the preaching of the Word and the “separated life.” The majority saw an orthodox church whose witness would reflect an informed study of the scriptural principles of the church and its work. The two visions are not incompatible. But in a time when their differences rather than their similarities are emphasized it becomes difficult for one to sympathize with the emphases of the other.

Both visions have a legitimate place in the Christian church. But the balance between them is always precarious. In the spring of 1937, with the crisis of leadership which followed Machen’s death, the scales were tipped and the balance lost.

¹³⁵ George S. Christian, “Let’s Not Talk about a Split in the Bible Presbyterian Church,” (By the author, 1955), 1.