

“Church History: Heroes, Heretics & Holy Wars”

Sunday School Notes

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CLASS 20 – The Formation of the PCA

In class 18 we talked about J. Gresham Machen and the formation of the OPC. That was mainly in the North part of the Presbyterian Church. The southern part of the church stayed more conservative and so reform and break were not as necessary. By the 1960s, though, that was not the case.

Roy Taylor: “The Southern Church was not as quickly affected by theological decline, laxity in discipline, and trend toward a more hierarchal type of Presbyterian polity as was the Northern Church, but eventually such unhealthy beliefs and practices took root. After several decades of ineffective efforts to counteract those trends the PCUS conservatives faced a crossroads in the early 1970s. Some conservatives decided to remain in the PCUS to bear witness to evangelical truth. Others concluded that time, effort, and resources could be better channeled into positive efforts by forming a new denomination.”¹

Here’s how Paul Settle explains it:

“The southern Church was dying, and her own scholar-physicians were killing her. Of course, scholar-physicians knew what they were doing all along. Many of them were younger ministers who, while studying abroad, had become infected with destructive German rationalism. They began to deny the inerrancy and authority of the Holy Scriptures. They seemed embarrassed to belong to a small denomination that was, in their estimation, behind the theological times. Having denied the Bible, the total depravity of man and the Good News that God saves sinners, they decided that the ministry of the Church was not so much other-worldly as this worldly. After all, it seemed reasonable to assume that if there really is no literal heaven or hell, the best one can do is try to make this world less like hell and more like heaven. So they replaced the Gospel of Jesus Christ with the social gospel of neo-orthodoxy. They decided to try to change the PCUS from a consistently conservative, generally Calvinistic and missionary-minded church into a liberal, socially progressive and ecumenical one... their strategy was “to get men with similar views into the seminaries... colleges and principal pulpits” of the PCUS. “Then it would be just a matter of time before they could control the key committees of the church.”²

There was a decided effort to capture the Southern Presbyterian Church for the liberal agenda, led by the seminaries. Principles and practices started changing; belief in Scriptural inerrancy and Confessional standards went out the window. Various conservatives would fight back or organize committees outside the church – the Southern Presbyterian Journal, Concerned Presbyterians, The Presbyterian Evangelical Fellowship, Presbyterian Churchmen United, etc.

The Thompson-Glasgow Affair – in 1940, Tom Glasgow, a Ruling Elder, tried to have the PCUS look at the seminaries and discipline those who were outside the bounds of orthodoxy. He especially targeted Union Seminary and E.T. Thompson. But essentially the denomination refused to do anything. Then

¹ Dennis Bennett, ed. “An Inquirer’s Guide to the PCA” booklet, CE&P, 2010, p. 4.

² Paul & Georgia Settle, *To God All Praise And Glory: The 25th Anniversary of the Presbyterian Church in America*. PCA Admin Committee, 1998, p.19.

Thompson arranged for his home Presbytery to “try” him, which they did and declared him innocent. So then he was safe at the denominational level. Became a tricky tactic that liberals used.

By the beginning of the 70s, there were reports that PCUS youth retreats were teaching all kinds of sexual openness, youth magazines were supporting marijuana use, and the denomination was supporting abortion and universalism. Sunday School curriculum promoted pacifism, feminism and other social causes.

Conservatives Groups Formed in Response:

-Covenant College started in 1955 by Robert Rayburn and the former faculty of Highland College. Reformed Theological Seminary was started in 1966 in Jackson, MS to be a new conservative seminary.

-The Presbyterian Journal - Dr. L. Nelson Bell was a missionary who came back to America and tried to publicize the problems in the PCUS.

-Concerned Presbyterians (Kenneth Keyes started, Jack Williamson)

-Presbyterian Churchmen United (John Richards, Paul Settle & Frank Barker)

-The Convocation of Sessions in Atlanta, GA – May 19, 1973 – 450 Ruling Elders voted whether to begin a new denomination or not; 349 yes, 16 no.

-The 1st General Assembly – Birmingham, Briarwood Presbyterian Church, December 4, 1973. 382 elders. First called the National Presbyterian Church, but there was a church called that, so at the 2nd GA they changed it to Presbyterian Church in America.

There was an effort to try to join with 4 denominations in the late 70s, but eventually the RPCES (Reformed Presbyterian Church Evangelical Synod) was received in 1982 – the merger made the PCA a national Church and added Canadian churches as well to make the PCA an international Church.

Francis Schaeffer (1912-1984) was part of the Bible Presbyterian denomination that had split from the OPC in the 1930s – they were very similar but allowed premillennialism and were completely against alcohol. Schaeffer pastored in Grove City, PA and St. Louis, MO before moving to Switzerland, where he was going to start a mission for children. But as his vision for Christian cultural apologetics grew and deepened, he started L’Abri (the Shelter) in 1955, a kind of youth hostel where people could come, work, study, and have deep theological conversations. “Honest answers to honest questions” was his trademark line, and his complete confident in the Bible to provide answers for every question and challenge. Schaeffer issued one of the first warnings to Christians about postmodern relativism, and wrote strongly on issues like abortion and euthanasia.

Schaeffer became a strong figure in the RPCES, which merged with the PCA in 1983.

The PCA had grown more than 10 times as large in its first 30 years. It currently has over 80 presbyteries (8 of which are Korean), more than 1,750 churches, more than 350,000 members, more than 140 campus ministries, and over 640 career missionaries. We’ve had a 3 year average of planting a new church per week! If you want to hear about encouraging things happening in the denomination, see Dr. Silvernail’s paper “The Good News of General Assembly” on our website.

5 PCA distinctives:

- 1) Authority of Scripture
- 2) Confessional Commitment (Westminster Standards)
- 3) Connectionalism – churches are not independent of each other; ministry together
- 4) Parity of Elders (Ruling & Teaching)

5) The Great Commission

Some of the Great Debates of the PCA so far:

- Good Faith Subscription to the WCF
- Charismatic Gifts
- Theonomy/Reconstructionism
- Literal 6 Days of Creation
- Federal Vision
- Women Deacons
- Intinction

Tim Keller's Factions:

Pietists vs. Doctrinalists vs. Cultural Transformationists

OR

Pietists + Doctrinalists + Cultural Transformationists

Sources Used:

Dennis Bennett, ed. "An Inquirer's Guide to the PCA" booklet, CE&P, 2010.

Sean Michael Lucas, *On Being Presbyterian*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2006.

Paul & Georgia Settle, *To God All Praise And Glory: The 25th Anniversary of the Presbyterian Church in America*. PCA Admin Committee, 1998.