

Presbyterians and Separatist Evangelicals: A Continuing Dilemma

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Mainstream Reflections on the Evangelical Controversy in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

*From the author: One of the advantages of online publishing is the opportunity to revise one's thoughts in the light of readers' suggestions. I thank those who have pointed out statements that needed correction or clarification. One point I wish to stress is that this essay is **not** written as a critique of evangelicals, per se, but only to raise concern about the effectiveness those individuals on the "right" (as indeed on the "left") who insist upon separation (personal or ecclesiastical) as a means of resolving differences. My concern is that such action goes against a more foundational Reformed belief that we are gathered in the church together by the call and election of Christ. This publication is entitled "Perspectives;" as such, my thoughts are offered simply as one minister's perspective. Others will have theirs as well. I certainly do not claim infallible or exhaustive insight. If someone feels my remarks do not describe the church they know, then I am glad, since as one who grew up in our church's conservative tradition, I have no desire to impugn those who hold these views. Instead, I hope that what I say could help the whole church to resolve conflicts that naturally arise in a more helpful, lasting, and unifying way. (February 22, 2007)*

I was reared in the conservative ethos of the old Presbyterian Church in the United States—or 'Southern' Presbyterian Church, as it was known. At best, it was a rich tradition, nurturing its young on the Shorter Catechism and its officers with the Westminster Confession of Faith. These exercises—which called for no little effort—put small-town believers in touch with a spiritual and intellectual tradition that spanned the seas and united us with saints as diverse as Abraham, Paul, Augustine, Calvin, Witherspoon, and Woodrow Wilson.¹

At worst, the tradition embraced a regional parochialism and racial segregation, and turned a blind eye to human injustice, poverty, and other societal manifestations of its otherwise incisive doctrine of sin. But with the exception of discussions over issues such as reunion with 'Northern' Presbyterians or 'mixing' of the races, it was positive Christianity.² Church life was vibrant, and our congregations enjoyed the deep respect of the community. Our Presbyterianism was seen as a "system of doctrine"—which included certain basic doctrines but was by no means limited to any narrow set of

¹My intellectual formation as a Presbyterian began with a book entitled, *Presbyterians: Their History and Beliefs* by Walter L. Lingle (Richmond: John Knox, 1944 and reissued many times since). He describes ours "as church with a catholicity of spirit reaching out a friendly, co-operative hand to all Churches of Jesus Christ throughout the world" (p. 109).

²This tone is set better than by any other writer in a book by Egbert Watson Smith, *The Creed of Presbyterians* (Richmond: John Knox, 1954). Smith writes, "the catholicity of Presbyterianism, its liberality of thought and feeling, its freedom from sectarian narrowness and bigotry, is one of its crowning characteristics." Benjamin Harrison, that noble gentleman, statesman, and Christian said with truth, "There is no body of Christians in the world that opens its arms wider and more lovingly to all who love the Master than the Presbyterian Church" (p. 169).

‘fundamentals.’ This breadth of interest and belief was one of the things that set Presbyterians apart from other denominations that found strength in the American South. A Baptist aunt of my best friend once told me that she had always admired the Presbyterians for the quiet dignity of their services. Another observed that the marks of Southern Presbyterianism were its beautiful pastoral prayers and “thoughtful, *prepared* sermons”—things not always found in other churches.

Conservative Southern Presbyterianism was, for me, a way of entry into the wider Reformed tradition.³ My parents and older church friends were eager for me to have the ‘broadening’ experiences that came with education—the more expansive, the better. Unlike many of my contemporaries in college and seminary, who considered themselves “evangelicals first” and so left the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) for more conservative situations, I have rejoiced in my growing appreciation for the wider Reformed tradition—the “crisis theologians” of the 1930s—Tillich, Barth, the Niebuhrs, the liberation and feminist theologians, as well as insights of science, history, sociology, and psychology—in sum, the broad Presbyterian ethos—classical *and* modern, as found in Scotland, England, Continental Europe, and indeed, wherever member bodies of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches may be found.⁴

I give thanks that these have been my horizon and my home. But as I acknowledge my debt to the Presbyterianism of my youth, I am puzzled why its effect on me has been different from so many.

Origins of today’s Presbyterian evangelicalism

At the outset, it must be recognized that conservative Presbyterians in the American South have always understood themselves to be an “evangelical church” in the historic use of that word—that is, a communion standing in the great Protestant tradition of Luther, Calvin, and Edwards—a church that builds on the preaching of the gospel and the faithful administration of the sacraments. The word “evangelical” is found often in the writings of older Presbyterian and Reformed theologians and was understood to represent all Protestants, not a particular party within the church. That said, Southern Presbyterianism has also been influenced by the more recent phenomenon of “Fundamentalism”—a movement traced to 19th century revivalist movements, the

³I learned from books such as John T. McNeil, *The History and Character of Calvinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), James Hastings Nichols, *Corporate Worship in the Reformed Tradition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968); John A. Mackay, *The Presbyterian Way of Life* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1960); John H. Leith, *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981).

⁴Books published in recent years by theologians such as John H. Leith, *The Reformed Imperative: What the Church Has to Say that No One Else Can Say* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988) and *Basic Christian Doctrine* (1993), Shirley C. Guthrie Jr., *Christian Doctrine* (1994), Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeks Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), Mark Douglas, *Confessing Christ in the 21st Century* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), and Stephen W. Plunkett, *This We Believe: Eight Truths that Presbyterians Affirm* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2002), demonstrate the continuing vitality of mainstream Reformed theological reflection and provide excellent summaries of mature Presbyterian theological reflection, building upon the church’s confessional tradition and appropriating insights from the wider world of ecumenical Christianity.

church's struggles to come to terms with the study of the historical origins of the biblical text and Darwin's theory of evolution, and by the popular Protestantism of the Methodists, Baptists, Pentecostals, and Churches of Christ in the 20th century.⁵ Pentecostalism and its charismatic worship have had a major effect in recent years on the evangelical movement in the Presbyterian Church—so much so that nationally evangelicalism and Pentecostalism are virtually synonymous terms. The development of Southern Presbyterian evangelicalism in recent years cannot be understood apart from these influences.

By the late 1920s, many Presbyterian conservatives were much distressed in the aftermath of the Scopes trial in Dayton, Tennessee, which excited such great public interest in the question of the Bible's relation to science. In the north, the strictest Presbyterian conservatives—now known as fundamentalists—had abandoned the public and denominational colleges, universities, and seminaries and established institutions of their own, such as Westminster Seminary or Carl McIntire's Faith Seminary, both in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Southern Presbyterians of fundamentalist inclination continued, by and large, to attend the public colleges and denominational schools, some of which—Columbia Theological Seminary in Georgia and Belhaven College in Mississippi—were virtually under their control.

But in the 1950s, under the leadership of Billy Graham and others, an effort was made to renew cooperation between fundamentalists and what were then called the “mainline churches.” This movement became known as “Neo-Evangelicalism,” and later its adherents simply called themselves “evangelicals.”

To be evangelical in this sense was to aspire to be better educated, cooperative, and more defined by what one was “for” rather than by what one was against. In sum, the neo-evangelicals sought a more positive approach than had characterized the older fundamentalism. Many were ashamed by their lack of education and resolved to attend the same colleges and seminaries as mainstream leaders and to argue for their principles in that setting and culture. This philosophy was greatly attractive to conservative Southern Presbyterians, who had always valued an educated approach to faith.⁶

Evangelicalism prospered in the “born-again” movement of the 1970s, and with the support of national leaders like Jimmy Carter, enjoyed popularity and influence. It has also found new common ground with Pentecostals, and even more with conservative Roman Catholics, where united concern about the proliferation of abortion as a means of birth control eclipsed old differences over justification by faith alone.

The rise of neo-fundamentalism

⁵See Kenneth K. Bailey, *Southern White Protestantism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964).

⁶See Richard G. Hutcheson, Jr., *Mainline Churches and the Evangelicals: A Challenging Crisis* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981) and George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

Neo-evangelicalism served as a “bridge movement” for many Presbyterians. For some, it was a means of entering more fully into the life of mainstream Protestantism with its broad cultural sweep; for others it proved to be a route by which to become more closely allied with the more fundamentalist (and non-Presbyterian) heritage, out of which a large portion of the evangelical movement arose. By the 1990s, the term fundamentalism was again used with pride among Christians in the South, most notably among leaders of the successful conservative movement in the Southern Baptist Convention—described as a “takeover” by moderates who resisted the politics of the Baptist leaders who described themselves as fundamentalists. In 2006, the Rev. Gary Demarest, a leader of PC(USA) evangelicals, spoke of a “massive resurgence of fundamentalism” in his own denomination.

Presbyterian evangelicals have followed both paths because, for complex reasons we will now examine, the movement has always seemed to require among its adherents a choice as to which way they will go. The propensity toward intellectual and ecclesiastical separatism—so characteristic of 20th century fundamentalism—has reasserted itself in the neo-fundamentalism of the early 21st century. This tendency is of concern to American Presbyterians, and not least to Presbyterians in the American South.

Polarizing debates and para-church organizations

Tumultuous debates in the 1920s and ‘30s over evolution, the virgin birth, and the literal resurrection, and since the 1960s over race, war and peace, ecumenism, and human sexuality, have caused the stream of evangelicalism in the Presbyterian church to come to a watershed.⁷ As the more liberal parties in the church have evolved, so has the evangelical movement. Each group has moved toward the logical extremes of its positions, making cooperation and mutual respect more difficult.

Some adherents of the evangelical movement embraced the church in its establishment patterns—attending its seminaries, gaining insight from contemporary theologians, working in its governmental structures. Others allied with para-church movements—the Presbyterian Lay Committee, the Presbyterian Coalition, New Wineskins, Presbyterians Pro-Life, and so forth—a reminder that evangelicals practice ecumenism—but of a different sort than that officially sanctioned by the governing bodies of the church. Liberal Presbyterians also formed interest groups, and many denominational leaders claiming the “centrist” position decried the tendency of both sides to find their primary fellowship in these organizations outside the official governing bodies of the church.⁸

Secular politics

⁷In many ways, the Presbyterian Church in America has dealt well with the matter of racial integration, so much so that younger leaders in that church do not remember or acknowledge the important role that preservation of old Southern mores played in the formation of that communion. See Joel L. Alvis Jr., *Religion and Race: Southern Presbyterians, 1946-1983* (University of Alabama Press, 1994).

⁸These have included such evangelical leaders as Harry Hassall, *People of the Middle Way* (Franklin, TN: Providence House Publishers, 1996).

Beginning in the 1980s, most evangelicals embraced the burgeoning “Christian Right”—a movement that blended secular activism with conservative religious doctrine. The movement, led by avowed Pentecostal and fundamentalist leaders such as Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, downplayed older evangelical emphases on personal spirituality and adopted a “culture wars” ideology that measured Christian faithfulness by willingness to engage in efforts to elect leaders who would oppose abortion, divorce, and homosexuality. Among Presbyterians, especially in the South, this represented a sea change in conservative practice—marking the abandonment of the old Southern Presbyterian doctrine of “the spirituality of the church”—long cited in the ongoing critique of the liberal element of the church which advocated a “social gospel” and was said to support liberal politicians openly from the pulpit and through the editorial voice of periodicals, such as *The Presbyterian Outlook* and *Christian Century*. Few evangelicals noted what a shift in their thinking had taken place.⁹

Political activism by American Presbyterians can be traced all the way back to revivalists who supported the Revolution of 1776. Whereas older Presbyterians held to a doctrine of the “spirituality of the church” and criticized “liberal” meddling in political affairs, by the last decades of the 20th century, the church was confronted by the irony of a chastened liberalism that was less politically active and an evangelical wing with an unapologetically partisan agenda. Indeed, during the impeachment trial of President Clinton, five of the eleven managers appointed from the House of Representatives to prosecute the case before the Senate were Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) church members—evangelicals committed to a political cause so explicitly that one PCA editor claimed that the attempted removal of the President was “virtually a PCA initiative.”

Thus far, no political issue has arisen to divide the evangelical movement. Still, political activity of evangelicals has contributed to an unfortunate situation in which the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has come to be divided on lines similar to those in partisan politics. The polarization has contributed to a perception that parties in the church are allowing their debates to be shaped by the agendas of the major American political parties. Indeed, some have charged that terms of fellowship in the church are set, not by faith in Christ, but by one’s perceived position in the ongoing culture wars.¹⁰

The alliance of Presbyterian conservatives (particularly in the South) with the evangelical movement in American Protestantism throughout the 20th century brought together several disparate streams of thought with stimulating results. Persons from such diverse traditions as the Orthodox Presbyterian, Christian Reformed, and Northern Baptist Churches came South (many via institutions such as Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia, and Bob Jones University in South Carolina). These ministers found their place in the old Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS), so that for a number of years it was not unusual to see ministers from these backgrounds occupying influential

⁹See Lloyd J. Averill, *Religious Right, Religious Wrong: A Critique of the Fundamentalist Phenomenon* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989).

¹⁰Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997).

pulpits and teaching posts in old bastions of Confederate Presbyterianism.¹¹ The marriage was not perfect, and in time this cultural and ideological mix led to the separation of many congregations from their former ecclesiastical homes.

As a result of the resurgence of separatist theology among some Protestant evangelicals,¹² along with divisions in the PCUS and the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (UPCUSA) to form the Presbyterian Church in America and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, some graduates of seminaries such as Fuller in California, Reformed in Mississippi, and Gordon-Conwell in Massachusetts, founded to influence the established churches, largely abandoned such efforts and concentrated on conservative constituencies in the smaller denominations. Strategies such as the “church growth movement” and “contemporary worship”—both influenced by emergent Pentecostal thinkers and churches, brought growth to evangelicals and neo-fundamentalists, so that there was less interest in being part of the once-socially-prominent older churches, such as the UPCUSA—which was, in any case, at a point of significant numerical decline.

How evangelicals recognize fellow-believers

Several streams of evangelicalism in America developed out of traditions influenced by the Anabaptist movements that followed the Protestant Reformation, as well as 18th century European pietism and certain strains of English Puritanism. Each of these earlier movements placed great reliance upon what might be called *spiritual intuition* in discerning the body of Christ. Discernment of believers from unbelievers is achieved by recognition of accepted words and phrases, Bible translations, styles of prayer and praise, and the acknowledgement of common friends and institutions—as one observer has remarked—“a sort of tribalism by cliché”—what psychologists identify as “the language of a subculture.” This trait has been remarked upon by nearly every observer of evangelical practice, yet it is said that evangelicals who employ this form of “peer identification” do so almost unconsciously and are uncritical in its use. All religious organizations are likely to develop a recognizable technical jargon, but not all organizations draw radical spiritual conclusions based upon the use of common “code words” or Bible translations.

Almost as with the secret handshakes of a lodge, evangelicals are able to identify fellow travelers, and these intuitive determinations are usually made swiftly, and with finality. Pietistic commitments have been observed to carry almost more weight than confessional commitments, so that doctrinal diversity of a certain sort (immersion vs. sprinkling,

¹¹This was chronicled in an article entitled, “Infiltration—To What End?” *The Presbyterian Outlook* 129 (June 17, 1957), 5-7.

¹²It goes without saying that conservatives and evangelicals in their tens of thousands have happily subscribed to the Presbyterian form of government and that the Presbyterian church is entirely cordial to the membership of those who embrace its doctrines wholeheartedly. This paper takes issue only with those who hold an un-Presbyterian theology, namely “separatism,” and seek to exploit the church’s form of government to lead others away from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). All of the smaller Presbyterian denominations founded in the 20th century have established membership in presbytery as a purely voluntary affiliation. That is, ministers and churches may leave at any time for reasons sufficient to themselves.

participation in the charismatic movement, etc.) is often tolerated so long as one “loves the Lord.” This toleration is usually NOT extended to “liberals” on the grounds that they do not manifest the requisite piety. Piety is thus sometimes exalted over principle, and faith over learning, so that among a sometimes highly doctrinal religious fellowship, a *de facto* anti-intellectualism in practice can often result.¹³

When threatened, evangelicals close ranks based upon these intuitive determinations. This tendency is reinforced by the insistence of most evangelicals—based upon Puritan, Pietist, and Anabaptist influences—that one must give testimony of a specific moment of “conversion,” apart from and even in opposition to the fact of being reared in a covenant home or within the rites and graces of the church.¹⁴ Evangelicals, while certainly stressing the religious nurture of the young, admit to an unresolved conflict between the idea of a Christian upbringing and the belief that a person must still be “converted” in a defining moment of spiritual awakening. In this sense, as Samuel S. Hill, of the University of North Carolina, has noted, “Presbyterianism in the South has lain a few degrees to the left of the central stream of its heritage.”¹⁵

Black and white theology

The evangelical movement, like many forceful religious movements, is ideologically driven. But the ideology is carefully defined, unlike the pragmatism that often characterizes the belief and practice of persons who claim the more moderate ground. This means that evangelicals often see matters as choices of “black vs. white,” of “light vs. darkness.” There is little appreciation for or patience with “gray” areas, or for situations of moral ambiguity. Indeed, Scottish Presbyterian minister and Old Testament professor James Barr asserts, “the idea that it might be salutary and fruitful for the church to contain opposites and extremes within the one body is entirely absent from fundamentalism.”¹⁶

Mark Noll, a Presbyterian historian and scholar of evangelicalism now teaching at Notre Dame, believes this tendency harkens back to the ancient Manichean heresy that divides the world into radically disjointed sections, the children of light and the children of darkness. Noll also senses that evangelicalism (especially in its dispensational and Pentecostal wings) is prone to the Gnostic heresy, whereby claims are made to special truth and understanding available only to the enlightened.

A classic statement of this position was Princeton professor J. Gresham Machen’s book, *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923), where the fundamentalist and liberal positions were defined as separate religions that shared terminology but no commonality of basic

¹³Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

¹⁴Insistence on a moment of conversion as opposed to the ability to testify to having reached a state of conversion through a period of growth in grace was a precise point of division between the theologies of Old School Presbyterians and New England Congregationalists in the 19th century.

¹⁵Samuel S. Hill Jr., *Southern Churches in Crisis* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1966): 75.

¹⁶James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), 317.

truth claims.¹⁷ Machen declared that a choice must be made, and for most the evangelicals the choice has been clear: the largest number in America¹⁸ are in ecclesiastical homes outside the mainstream churches.¹⁹

A related aspect of evangelicalism is the implicit belief that one cannot be saved apart from adherence to correct doctrine. While preaching a gospel of salvation by grace, evangelicals often teach that those whose doctrine falls short of conformity to their interpretation of the faith are, in fact, “not Christians.” Indeed, evangelicals attach eternal consequences to the affirmation or denial of evangelical truth—particularly concerning literal interpretations of the virgin birth, resurrection, and second coming of Jesus. This insistence seems to some observers to be in tension with the reliance on a “born again” experience of Christ—and yet the manifestation of correct understanding is usually seen as the test of a valid conversion experience. Barr remarks, “Although in theory fundamentalism preaches a message that calls for nothing but decision for Christ, the dynamics of the group very quickly ensure that this is filled up with a content of distinctively conservative evangelical doctrine.”²⁰

While not disparaging the quest for clarity in theology, critics of the evangelical movement have averred that this insistence on certain normative interpretations in theology erects a system of “salvation by works,” even if the works be of an intellectual kind, and it has been asked if, in consequence of this insistence upon correct belief, Christianity becomes a religion exclusively for the intellectually astute, or if salvation is withheld from the ignorant, stubborn, or foolish among humankind.

Separatism as a defining belief

James Barr observes that “fundamentalism, organizationally is not a sect, it is a position that overlaps into many churches and denominations.” “But,” he goes on to say, “intellectually it is a sect. Its doctrines, its literature, its biblical interpretation, its modes of speech, thought and friendship mark out a clearly identifiable social organism.”²¹ The

¹⁷More recently Lonnie Kliever has described a pluralism, which recognizes “that different persons and different groups quite literally indwell irreducibly different worlds.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 50 (Spring 1992), 119.

¹⁸The Rev. Dr. Thomas W. Gillespie, president-emeritus of Princeton Seminary, argues that while Machen was not a fundamentalist but a strict Westminster confessionalist in theology, “he had an *Anabaptist* doctrine of the Church that placed a premium on the purity of the Christian life. Unlike his predecessor Charles Hodge, whose Reformed ecclesiology included the wisdom of the dominical parable about allowing the wheat and the weeds to grow together until harvest....Machen was a purist....In his view there was no possibility of theological ‘light’ associating with doctrinal ‘darkness’ in the Church.” *Presbyterian Outlook*—“Why Stay In?” special issue (Summer 2006), 20.

¹⁹See Bradley J. Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy: Fundamentalists, Modernists, and Moderates* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991) and William J. Weston, *Presbyterian Pluralism: Competition in a Protestant House* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997). It is no accident that the Presbyterian Lay Committee’s recent booklet urging withdrawal from the PCUSA borrows Machen’s argument. The title asks, *Can Two Faiths Embrace One Future?* The answer is that they emphatically cannot. Slightly over 350,000 Presbyterians belong to the small, conservative Presbyterian denominations. The PC(USA) currently numbers 2.3 million members.

²⁰*Fundamentalism*, 321.

²¹*Ibid.*, 342.

history of American Presbyterianism has shown that, in many cases, evangelicalism has been a movement *into, through, and out* of the church—as scores of ministers who have pledged vows of ordination have separated themselves from the Presbyterian church, taking members, officers, and church property with them. Indeed, in Mississippi, where Reformed Seminary—a national center of Reformed evangelicalism is located—only a handful of the sixty-odd ministers ordained into the PCUS–UPCUSA presbyteries of the state have remained to labor within their ordaining denomination. The most contemporary manifestation of this phenomenon among Presbyterians, originally named “The Confessing Movement *Within* the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)”—organized in 2002 and allied with the Presbyterian Lay Committee, which since the General Assembly of 2006 speaks of the church’s irreversible “plunge into apostasy” and called for congregations to secede from the parent body.²² This tendency has blunted the Presbyterian evangelical movement, at least for those whose goal has been to positively influence the larger ecclesiastical structure. For this reason, mainstream leaders often regard evangelicals with distrust and identify them as strident, uncompromising, and divisive.

Many evangelicals have bewailed the tendency of colleagues to carry on church discussions with the idea of withdrawal always in the background. For such persons, the unity of the church is always hostage to the issue of the moment, so that evangelicals in Presbyterian history have had difficulty mobilizing or maintaining their majorities, or winning the trust of their opponents.

Evangelicalism is much influenced by the doctrine of “separation,” which grows out of European Pietism, and which was mediated to the United States by groups as diverse as the Amish and Mennonites (also descendants of the Anabaptists), Pentecostals, and fundamentalists in the North, such as the General Association of Regular Baptists. It is still practiced *de rigeur* in such fundamentalist strongholds as Bob Jones University.²³

This absolutist stance brings Presbyterian evangelicals into direct conflict with the liberal wing of the church, which takes as its absolutes qualities such as pluralism, diversity, and inter-religious, multicultural dialogue. To neo-fundamentalist absolutists, the degree that evangelicalism embraces such values, it ceases to be evangelical. One observer has remarked, “To be willing to discuss the controverted issues almost by definition marks one as “liberal,” for to a true conservative, there is no place for debate or negotiation about obvious truths.” Few in the liberal wing of the church realize the ideological and methodological sacrifice that is called for when thoroughgoing evangelicals are asked to engage in negotiation, conflict mediation, cooperation, or compromise, for to the conservative evangelical, to even acknowledge the *possibility* of truth in the ideology of those who hold false doctrine is a complete betrayal of all they believe loyalty to Christ demands. Jay Tolson, the biographer of novelist Walker Percy,

²²“Broken Covenant: Statement on the 217th General Assembly by the Presbyterian Lay Committee Directors,” (July 4, 2006). *The Presbyterian Layman Online*.

²³Millard J. Erikson “Separation,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. by Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 1002-1003.

who was reared in a liberal Southern Presbyterian household, muses about the difficulty of such matters, noting that in the South “honor is always inimical to compromise.”²⁴

The strong fidelity for which evangelicalism calls attracts devoted and highly committed adherents. These are reassured by the certainty given by a strong belief system—based on an infallible, most believe, inerrant Bible, which is understood and interpreted with absolute clarity. Evangelical churches have grown. There is no doubting the movement’s popular appeal. For the faithful, these commitments lie at the heart of both contemporary politics *and* religion.

After 1930, when Northern fundamentalists allied with Southern Presbyterian conservatives, the philosophy of separatism found fertile soil, for Southerners had long practiced the separation of the races, and many had been reared to believe that secession was an ancient and honorable way of resolving political differences.²⁵ Persons in the more liberal side of the church have often failed to see that conservatives see adversarial confrontation and separation as *positive goods*—as ways of setting God’s truth in bold relief before a watching world. God’s flock is seen as a remnant, with most of the world—indeed—most of Christendom hopelessly blind to the truth. The evangelical’s hope is, echoing Paul, “by all means to save some” (1 Cor. 9:22).

Just as fundamentalists streamed out of Northern Baptist and Presbyterian churches in the 1920s and ‘30s, so they streamed out of the PCUS and UPCUSA in the 1970s and ‘80s. In one sense, the emergence of groups such as the Evangelical Presbyterian Church and the PCA was testimony that the separatist evangelical movement had done its work. In another sense, it was an admission that the “neo-evangelicalism” promoted by Billy Graham and others was unable to transcend its separatist roots as many of the movement’s earlier leaders hoped it could do.

Southern Presbyterian theologian John H. Leith has remarked, “Fundamentalism can exist on both the right and the left of any religious spectrum.” He has further said, “Fundamentalisms of the right and the left are alike in that neither has the ability to be self-critical. The ability to be self-critical,” says Leith, “is perhaps the chief distinguishing characteristic between fundamentalism and mainstream religious philosophy.” He has written that one of the great failures of fundamentalism, in theology as well as politics “is its inability to recognize the pitiful, tragic, and ironic dimensions of human existence.”

A pessimistic view of the church and the future

Robert T. Henderson, an evangelical leader among Southern Presbyterians at the time of the PCA split, wrote that the doctrine of the Church was “an evangelical blind spot.”

²⁴Jay Tolson, *Pilgrim in the Ruins: A Life of Walker Percy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 29.

²⁵Between 1929 when Westminster Seminary was formed and the 1936 secession of its leaders from the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., Gresham Machen and other Westminster professors often spoke at summer conferences sponsored by the Synod of Mississippi at Belhaven College in Jackson, creating popular support for Machen during his trial by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., in 1936.

By this he meant that while evangelicals place emphasis upon membership (through the experience of the new birth) in what theologians call the true or “invisible” church, many depreciate and often disparage the organizational entity called the church “militant,” or “visible” church. Henderson wrote, “To be sure, we can honor the godly zeal that is jealous for the honor of Jesus, but...the insistent question is, Where is the zeal for Christ’s body, the Church?”²⁶

Pessimism about organized religion and world affairs pervades evangelical thought. This derives in large measure from a method of interpreting biblical prophecy known as dispensationalism that has influenced many evangelicals. This pessimism, in fact, seems to be widespread among evangelicals who do not hold all the various tenets of the dispensationalist system. Dispensationalism teaches that until the return of Christ, the world is the province of evil and the devil. God, the Creator and Redeemer of the world, is believed to be absent from the world—present now only in the hearts of true believers. Even the church is seen as hopelessly permeated by the powers of darkness. Moreover, the organized church, according to dispensational theology, must inevitably decline until it becomes a manifestation of Anti-Christ, and Jesus returns on the clouds of heaven to rapture his elect who have remained faithful amid the depravity of earth and even the supposed followers of Christ. This is the theology of such leaders as Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and other evangelical leaders.²⁷ Since the fundamentalist takeover of that denomination, dispensationalism has become the principal belief-system of the Southern Baptist Convention—although never officially adopted by that body. It is, effectively, the theology of all conservative television preachers.²⁸

Through the tendency to determine through intuition who is and who is not a believer, evangelicalism has tended to closely identify its followers with the membership of the “invisible” church. It has also tended to regard the visible or organized church as permeated with unbelief and pretenders to the faith. This pessimism and consequent willingness to disavow the organized church has naturally engendered much zeal to remake the church in conformity with the perceived boundaries of its true membership.

Many evangelicals testify that they spent years in the church believing they were followers of Jesus, only to realize after being born again that they had been deluded. These conversions often result in complete reversals of theological opinion,²⁹ and the lesson is that one must distrust one’s Christian upbringing and experience, as well as the outward rites and ordinances of the church, lest one be lulled by these things into a false

²⁶Robert T. Henderson, “The Doctrine of the Church: An Evangelical Blind Spot,” *The Open Letter: Newsletter of the Covenant Fellowship of Presbyterians* (March-April 1982), 1. Richard F. Lovelace, a Presbyterian minister who taught for many years at Gordon-Conwell Seminary in Massachusetts has remarked that schism is the “evangelical heresy.”

²⁷Dispensational theology is propagated through the notes of the popular Scofield Reference and Ryrie Study Bibles, and most recently, in the pages of the best-selling “Left Behind” novels.

²⁸Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1992).

²⁹Andrew A. Jumper, longtime pastor of Central Presbyterian Church in St. Louis, author of widely used officer training manuals, and a leader of the Presbyterian renewal movement was such an individual.

sense of salvation. This is, perhaps, the keenest conflict between the evangelical movement and traditional Reformed ecclesiology.

Evangelicals place much emphasis upon ‘renewal’ in their churches—a phenomenon characterized by interest in personal salvation and often, without apology, the embrace of Pentecostalism’s inward focus and exuberant worship. Churches in the mainstream of denominational thought are regarded as in need of “renewal” and, no matter how energetic, are—at least by implication—viewed as “spiritually dead” until they adopt evangelicalism’s spiritual principles and manner of worship.³⁰

Evangelicalism tends to disparage the rites and prerogatives of the organized church. It grants little significance to the organized church as a divine institution, regarding outward structures of the church as at best *ad hoc* arrangements for the furtherance of evangelistic goals and at worst a detriment to the propagation of true faith. For this reason, evangelicals often assert that ordination vows may be laid aside when they personally determine that the good faith or orthodoxy of the larger body is suspect. Some influential evangelicals even state that those who disagree with them represent Satanic influences in the church, so that it is not only appropriate to break vows made to “unbelief,” but right and proper to undertake them with hidden reservations in an effort to rescue God’s true children from the tyranny of the ecclesiastical establishment. As an example, on May 4, 1982, during questioning as to why he felt compelled to lay aside his ordination vows in attempting to lead the First Presbyterian Church of Grenada out of the PCUS, the Reverend Henry F. Poole Jr, the church’s pastor, declared that it was not immoral “to break a deal with the devil.” Later in that meeting, Poole renounced the jurisdiction of the denomination.

A departure from Calvin

The writings of John Calvin on ecclesiastical schism cast the classical Reformed tradition in sharp relief against the advocacy of division among evangelicals,³¹ whose ecclesiology derives from the Anabaptist churches of the Reformation and the separatist traditions of American fundamentalism. Dutch Reformed scholar M. Eugene Osterhaven remarks, “If these words of Calvin had been taken seriously by his disciples, the Reformed Church, often rent by schism would have been spared many a heartache.”³²

Calvin was aware that the church contained characters whose purity of life and soundness of doctrine were reprehensible. But he did not waver in his conviction that their presence did not obliterate the church’s light nor allow the faithful to depart from its care. He wrote, “In the church are mingled many hypocrites who have nothing of Christ but the name and outward appearance. There are very many ambitious, greedy, envious persons, evil speakers, and some of quite unclean life. Such are tolerated for a time either because they cannot be convicted by a competent tribunal or because a vigorous

³⁰The choice of hymnals and worship songs has become a decisive mark of evangelical churches, almost all of which have declined to use the hymnals published by the General Assembly of the PC(USA).

³¹See Thomas K. Spence Jr., “Calvin and Schism,” *Presbyterian Survey* (February 1972) 5: 33-34.

³²M. Eugene Osterhaven, *The Spirit of the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971).

discipline does not always flourish as it ought.... Just as we must believe, therefore, that the former church [that is, the ‘true church’], invisible to us, is visible to the eyes of God alone, so we are commanded to revere and keep communion with the latter [the ‘visible church’], which is called ‘church’ in respect to men.”

Calvin goes on to say, “Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there is not to be doubted a church of God exists. For his promise cannot fail: ‘Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them.’” With regard to some, he speaks of “a certain charitable judgment” that is necessary—“a slightly different basis for judgment concerning individual men and churches. For it may happen that we ought to treat like brothers and count as believers those we think unworthy of the fellowship of the godly, because of the common agreement of the church by which they are borne and tolerated in the body of Christ. We do not by our vote approve such persons as members of the church, but we leave them such place as they occupy among the people of God until it is lawfully taken from them.”

The Genevan reformer wrote of the visible church, that even when the preaching of the Word and administration of the sacraments is not received, “no one is permitted to spurn its authority, flout its warning, resist its counsels, or make light of its chastisements—much less to desert it and break its unity. For the Lord esteems the communion of his church so highly that he counts as a traitor and apostate from Christianity anyone who arrogantly leaves any Christian society, provided it cherishes the true ministry of Word and sacraments...From this it follows that separation from the church is the denial of God and Christ.”

Calvin took comfort in the electing grace of God. It was in the divine choice, not the human ability to manifest true doctrine or achieve adequate conformity to ethical practice that sustained membership in Christ’s body. He spoke of Satan’s attempts to dismember the church and asked, “How dangerous—nay, how deadly—a temptation is it, when one is prompted to withdraw from that congregation wherein are seen the signs and tokens with which the Lord thought his church sufficiently marked?” Calvin thought this principle so important that it must not be rejected “so long as [the church] retains them, even if it otherwise swarms with many faults.”

Calvin declared that a difference of opinion “over nonessential matters should in no wise be the basis of schism among Christians” and argued that “We are neither to renounce the communion of the church nor, remaining in it, to disturb its peace and duly ordered discipline.” Recalling the Cathari (literally, “Purifiers”) and the Donatists³³—

³³Donatists were Christians who condemned priests and bishops who had betrayed faithful believers during the persecutions of the emperor Diocletian (303-305 AD.). When the persecutions ended, some of these leaders continued to exercise their offices, and the Donatists preached against them, urging that the sacraments they administered were not valid due to their sinfulness. Augustine of Hippo opposed the schism. He taught that the validity of the sacraments depended upon the office, not the character of the one who happened to administer it. As David P. Teague has remarked, “In saying this, Augustine was admitting the imperfection of the church, yet he was also affirming the ability of God to work through an imperfect church.” Augustine’s argument against schism was simple: it will not create a perfect church. Augustine

heretics of the ancient church who promoted division for the sake of purity, Calvin thundered, “There have always been those who, imbued with a false conviction of their own perfect sanctity, as if they had already become a sort of airy spirits, spurned association with all men in whom they discern any remnant of human nature.” He sadly observed that there were those “who sin out of ill-advised zeal for righteousness,” so that “when they do not see a quality of life corresponding to the doctrine of the gospel...immediately judge that no church exists in that place.” He rebukes those who, “where the Lord requires kindness, neglect it and give themselves over completely to immediate severity”... because “they think no church exists where there are not perfect purity and integrity of life ...while they fancy themselves turning aside from the faction of the wicked.”

The Reformer moves toward the apex of his argument by asking “What would those who rage with such churlishness against present-day churches have done with the Galatians, all but deserters of the gospel, among whom [Paul] still recognized churches?” Another ancient worthy is invoked: “But to godly and peaceable men Augustine gives this advice: ‘Mercifully to correct what they can; patiently to bear and lovingly to bewail and mourn what they cannot; until God either amends or corrects or in the harvest uproots the tares and winnows the chaff.’” Calvin concludes by saying that people must “realize that in estimating the true church divine judgment is of more weight than human.”³⁴

Calvin was unfamiliar with the modern American phenomenon of denominations—but it was John Wesley who coined the word to designate those various branches of the church that extended the right hand of friendship to each another. The mainstream Presbyterian churches have always extended their welcome and communion to a larger number of religious persons than any other family of faith—and consequently our tradition makes a precise point of distinction in its condemnation of breaking communion in favor of a “purer” fellowship as opposed to friendly transfers for reasons of practical convenience. For example, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) sessions readily grant certificates of dismissal to individuals to denominations that refuse the same courtesy to us.

Disregard for history

While defending traditional doctrine and ethics, evangelicals often show disregard for tradition—considering that if truth is mediated directly from the Bible to the believer, then one may assume that he is in accord with the church’s tradition—thus no need to study history. A recent letter to the *Presbyterian Layman Online* from a Georgia elder expresses the idea pointedly. Referring to Calvin’s teaching on schism says, “I know Presbyterians are to look to Calvin for insight. However, on the subject and other

turned the tables on the Donatists, who claimed they were the true church on grounds of purity, by charging that they were in danger of not being the true church for lack of love. In Calvin’s era, the Anabaptists lauded the Donatists as heroes of the church. See Teague’s article: “Should We Separate? A Theology of Unity and Disunity,” *Presbyterian Outlook*—“Why Stay In?” special issue (Summer 2006): 21-27.

³⁴John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. by Ford Lewis Battles and ed. By John T. McNeil (2 vols., Philadelphia, Westminster, 1960), 2:1021-1031.

important issues before us, it seems a more worthy resource for the discussion of schism would have been the Holy Bible....” He then quotes Galatians 1:8-9, “But if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned...” and 2 Corinthians 6:17, “Therefore, come out from their midst and be separate...” The elder goes on to say, “Calvin, smalvin, the schism is the membership/leadership of PC(USA) offering up a false religion of the world,” and concludes, “We are under orders from on high to get out!”³⁵

Single-issue theology

In contrast to the scores of subjects addressed by John Calvin in his *Institutes*, and by subsequent theologians in the Reformed tradition and its confessions of faith and catechisms, much of modern neo-fundamentalist evangelicalism seeks to narrow the focus of faith’s intellectual content and ethical practice.³⁶

In one sense, evangelicalism can be seen as a victim of its success, because success allows the luxury of subdividing the ranks of “true believers” ever more narrowly. The ideologically driven character of evangelicalism is complicated by the fact that among evangelicals, *all issues* are watersheds, with each issue that arises over time becoming a new “defining moment,” by which the ideological purity of all that has been achieved is put at risk. Thus, even within the circle of evangelicals, harmony seldom results. However costly this squabbling and winnowing may be, it is believed to be a necessary process in the discernment and exhibition of truth. Controversy is seen, in fact, as necessary to the faith, as the means by which “wheat is separated from the tares.” One scholar of the fundamentalist movement has gone so far as to say that for this reason “the fight *is* the faith.” The tendency is not confined to fundamentalists. In his recent book tracing the movement toward union presbyteries and the consequent reaction of Presbyterians opposed to the 1983 union of the PCUS and the UPCUSA, William G. McAtee has written, “The story of Presbyterianism is largely a history of its divisions.”³⁷

Evangelical Presbyterians commonly declare that they find their unity “in truth,” whereas ecumenical Presbyterians insist that purity, unity, and truth in the church must be pursued together on equal terms. Thus, many Presbyterian evangelicals see no sin or even discouragement in having a string of denominations, each ordered according to the perception of truth espoused by its members.³⁸ The fact that not all of these various

³⁵Robert A. Browne, *Presbyterian Layman* Online (Aug 21, 2006).

³⁶Orthodox Presbyterian scholar D. G. Hart decries this tendency in his essay, “Defining Conservatism Down,” in *The Lost Soul of American Protestantism* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 57ff.

³⁷*Dreams, Where Have You Gone? Clues for Unity and Hope* (Louisville, KY: Witherspoon Press, 2006).

³⁸Since the Civil War, Presbyterian evangelicals have created new denominations to codify the belief and practice of a so-called golden age that existed several years before the denomination was formed. For example, the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States left untouched the older church’s tolerance for slavery and rejected the Northern Presbyterian calls to support the Federal Government. The Orthodox Presbyterian Church (1936) framed its standards to reflect the pre-1929 Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. before Princeton Seminary was reorganized to permit what conservatives saw as liberal teaching in its faculty. The Presbyterian Church in America (1973) reversed recent decisions in the PCUS concerning divorce and women’s ordination. The Evangelical Presbyterian Church, formed in the late 1970s, rejected the Book of Confessions, a collection of theological standards, including a contemporary statement of faith,

churches can be right is seen as a price to be paid in the continuing quest for both purity and truth, after which and only until the Lord returns, will there be unity among Christ's followers on earth.

To this principle may be another—a tendency toward “single-issue” advocacy. Whether promoting abolition in the 1840s, pushing for prohibition in the early 20th century, opposing Communism in the 1950s, or dealing with abortion, school prayer, or the ordination of homosexuals, evangelicals have followed many in the secular culture in making one's position on the cause *du jour* the test of fellowship and commitment. This phenomenon may not be a peculiarly ‘evangelical’ proclivity—indeed, a case could be made that throughout the history of Presbyterianism in Scotland, the Netherlands, and America, each time our church has faced a watershed issue, some kind of division or reunion has occurred.

An ‘ends justify the means’ ethic

Evangelicals adopt an “ends justify the means” type of action, which compels evangelical leaders to play “fast and loose” with facts. Jerry Falwell, in a recent CNN interview volunteered that “none of the outrageous things I’ve said has been an accident!” When asked why this was so, Falwell declared that controversy gained him a hearing and thus “an opportunity for the gospel.” Journalistic expediency is often justified for the sake of the greater goal of securing a victory for Christ. The *Presbyterian Layman* has been accused on numerous occasions of misquoting individuals (including once-sympathetic fellow-conservatives) in its articles.³⁹ Given the evangelical movement's dedication to the proposition that God's truth is inscripturated in words, the Lay Committee's frequent appearance of impropriety in its representation of facts—as cited by investigative committees of the General Assembly—is ironic, for in some ways, greater responsibility is placed upon evangelicalism, given its belief that its opponents are the ones who are said to have departed from the truth.

Evangelicals demand strict conformity. Thus, if anyone breaks ranks on one point, they are likely to be ostracized with a ferociousness that is breathtaking to outsiders. The case of evangelical reaction to 2001 General Assembly moderator Jack Rogers, a former professor at the evangelical Fuller Seminary in California, or evangelical members of the recent Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church (“PUP”) Task Force, are recent examples, but the phenomenon was seen among other earlier evangelical leaders who questioned longstanding opinions. Clark Pinnock, who

“The Confession of 1967,” used as the denominational standard of belief since that year by the church's parent body, the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. This phenomenon presents a dilemma to present-day evangelicals contemplating withdrawal from the PC(USA), since “Confessing Presbyterians” in the PC(USA) are at one with their friends in the separatist denominations on many issues, but now find that a sticking point of women's ordination and divorce with the PCA, as well as the use of a Book of Confessions with the EPC, may prevent their turning to these churches as an option for realignment.

³⁹A special committee of the General Assembly reported in 1991 that they found the *Presbyterian Layman* had a journalistic style that has been “characterized by stridency, the printing of half-truths, personal attacks, and exaggeration” and thus has not always been “a fair voice of dissent.” *Minutes of the General Assembly* (PCUSA) 1991, 1:419ff.

questioned the idea of biblical inerrancy and Paul K. Jewett, who embraced the ordination of women, were exiled from evangelical fellowship. Charles Wiley, principal author of a controversial study paper on the Trinity that was received for study (but not approved as doctrine) by the 2006 General Assembly of the PC(USA), which suggests various alternate names (most used by theologians of the ancient church) by which the members of the Godhead and their functions may be described, is a former staff member of Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, a respected evangelical campus ministry organization. Billy Graham has been criticized for efforts to reach across party lines. An evangelical who moves into more mainstream thought pays a price among his friends and colleagues, but ironically, liberals who ally with evangelicals are not forced to surrender all their positions to make common cause on particular issues.

A quest for dominance

Whereas today's liberal thought seeks to incorporate diversity, absolutist viewpoints seek to eliminate it. In 1976, James Barr wrote, "Where it comes about that fundamentalists have the power, it must be expected that they will use that power to silence those of contrary opinion. They will seek to eliminate from structures of church and education persons who are not sufficiently conservative." Events in the Southern Baptist Convention after Barr wrote confirm the accuracy of his assertion. Similarly, persons associated with the Confessing Movement⁴⁰ in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) have made clear their intention, if able, to remove those who disagree with their position as indicated by the twenty-five judicial cases filed in the church courts by Presbyterian elder Paul Rolf Jensen, a California attorney who is general counsel of the Westminster Fellowship and supported by the Presbyterian Lay Committee. As Barr remarks, "The fundamentalist policy is not to listen to the non-conservative arguments and then reject them: it is that the non-conservative arguments should not be heard at all."

Barr believes that Fundamentalism is a pathological condition of Christianity. "The real and fatal cost of fundamentalist doctrine and ideology, as a system of life, is not its inner logical inconsistency, but rather its personal cost: It can be sustained as a viable way of life only at the cost of unchurching and rejecting, as persons, as thinkers or scholars, and as Christians, all those who question the validity of the conservative option."⁴¹

It must be noted in the present controversy over the ordination of gay persons in committed relationships to office in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), that the evangelical party is not battling to retain the *status quo*, but to go beyond the present standards to a church structure that is more expressly evangelical and conservative. This

⁴⁰It is ironic that, although the Confessing Church movement borrows the name used by the German Christians who resisted Hitler, conservative Christians of earlier eras condemned the neo-orthodox theology of the German confessing movement's "Theological Declaration of Barmen," and at the time resisted all attempts to incorporate the declaration into a 'Book of Confessions' for the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.

⁴¹*Fundamentalism*, 314-316, 318.

may be clearly seen in the declarations of the “Confessing Church” and “New Wineskins” movements.⁴²

To do less is seen as a surrender of one’s principles. This is both the power and the problem of groups as diverse as Orthodox Judaism in Israel, the Shi’ite and Sunni Muslims, the Taliban in Afghanistan, Southern Baptists in the U. S., and left-wing groups such as gay and lesbian “Act-Up” organizations. It is a defining characteristic of fundamentalisms, whereas current conceptions of liberalism usually celebrate diversity in thought and multi-cultural pluralism.

Strident interpretations of traditional doctrine

At times, neo-fundamentalist evangelicals in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) have attempted to defend traditional beliefs by applying them in ways that are more exclusive than has ever been the practice previously. This could be seen as a reaction to perceived challenges, but has the effect of moving the denomination “further right” than has ever been the case. One example is the Confessing Movement’s affirmation that Jesus Christ is “alone” Lord of all and savior of the world. Presbyterians have always proclaimed God’s grace in Jesus Christ and have called upon all to turn to him for salvation—this affirmation has always been expressed as a *positive* appeal. But in present discussions, effort has been made in the manner of Southern Baptist Convention president Bailey Smith, who famously declared that “God does not hear the prayer of a Jew”—that is, the *negative* assertion that *no salvation is possible* for anyone outside of faith in Jesus Christ.

Some leaders of the early church sought to open the possibility that salvation was broader than the limits of the Christian fold. While tracing all salvation to Christ, Justin Martyr in the second century declared that Socrates and other Greek philosophers were ‘Christian’ on the grounds that the Logos (or Word of God) whose presence was focused in Christ informs the whole creation. All who live by reason, Justin contended, are Christians. Augustine of Hippo also wrote that just as there were wolves *within* the church, there were many sheep *without* the fold.

The issue was a source of well-known dispute between Calvin and Zwingli, two Swiss founders of the Reformed Church, and this difference is held in tension in the confessional documents of the Reformed tradition. John H. Leith has noted Presbyterianism has always carried on its discussion of these matters in the parameters set forth in the seminal discussions of Calvin and Zwingli. Leith writes that Zwingli expected to meet the Greek and Roman philosophers, along with the saints of the Old Covenant in heaven. After all, Aristotle had conceived of God as one, in contrast to the pagan pantheon. Calvin was not so sure. He taught that religions have their origin in the

⁴²The Presbyterian Coalition in 2002 adopted a four-part strategy to bring the church to a more conservative position. This includes (1) “destabilizing” the denomination by withholding funds; (2) limiting the right to vote in presbytery only to “pastors accountable to viable congregations,”—e.g., removing associate pastors, retired clergy, and ministers involved in teaching, administrative, and chaplaincy roles as voting members of governing bodies; (3) redefining connectionalism as “only among like-minded” churches; and (4) forcing those who disagree with them on ordination standards “to peacefully separate” from the church or be disciplined. Presbyterian Coalition Website, 2002.

universal revelation of God in the created order. Religion, he taught is the consequence of the human response to this revelation, a response that has been corrupted by sin. Thus, with the evangelical claims of Scripture in mind, the Heidelberg Catechism speaks of Christ, as the One who “saves us from our sins” and declares that “salvation is to be sought or found in no other” (Q. 29) while on the other hand, the Second Helvetic Confession asserts, “We do not so narrowly restrict the church as to teach that all those are outside the church who do not participate in the Sacraments...for we know that God had some friends in the world outside the commonwealth of Israel” (Chap. 27).

The 17th century orthodox Reformed theologian Heinrich Bullinger, who traced all salvation to the predestinating will of God, wanted no boundaries set as to who may be saved outside the church. He wrote, “It is certain that there were an innumerable company of men [sic] dispersed throughout the whole world among the Gentiles, who never did nor could, communicate with this visible company and congregation of God’s people; and yet notwithstanding they were holy members of this society in communion and the friends of almighty God.”⁴³

In their official creedal statements, Presbyterians have, up to now, *never* speculated on, or made blanket negative declarations as to what shall happen to those who reject Christ, who never had a chance to hear of his love or who were otherwise not competent to make a conscious commitment or exercise intelligent faith. The Reformed community has always, with great humility and modesty, considered questions of divine election and salvation with these important scriptural and theological considerations in view. Indeed, as a number of Presbyterian leaders have pointed out, this effort to make a restrictive theory of divine grace normative for the whole church, rather than the present and controversial matter of the ordination of homosexuals should be considered as the most important subject of theological debate raised by neo-fundamentalists in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

The “declaratory statement” added to Chapter III of the Westminster Confession of Faith in 1903 sought specifically to assure that “elect infants dying in infancy” were saved, although and apart from the fact that they could not humanly call upon the name of Christ. The Presbyterian church has also affirmed that the saints of the Hebrew Scriptures found grace, even though they could not know the identity of God’s messiah, or call upon him by name.

Coming at a time when vast amounts of new information and understanding of other world religions is available and when inter-religious conflict in Israel, Indonesia, Northern Ireland, the Balkans, India, Sudan, and Pakistan—and now when the free nations of the world find themselves at war with Islamic terrorists in Afghanistan and Lebanon—the question must be asked whether the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) truly wishes to harden its position with regard to other religions? Also, an un-nuanced and forceful declaration that there is no salvation outside Christ could open our American Church to charges of anti-Semitism—a position that would not only be historically un-

⁴³For references, see John H. Leith, *Basic Christian Doctrine* (Westminster/John Knox, 1993), Chapter 21.

Presbyterian, but which would go against the passionate conviction of many evangelicals, that God has not abandoned his covenant with Israel.⁴⁴

The informal customs that have prevailed throughout Southern Presbyterianism of extending and receiving hospitality from Jewish congregations indicates that, at a practical level, a good deal more charity has been practiced than is displayed in the official confessions of the Church. Thus, at Greenwood, Mississippi, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Presbyterian church and Hebrew temple have both used each other's houses of worship due to fires experienced by both. At Natchez, Mississippi, and Helena, Arkansas, Presbyterian choirs have sung for the Hebrew services on Friday nights. Numerous additional examples of this sort can be given from across the South. The strident nature of the present discussions put such informal contacts between Christians and Jews at risk.

And though it is recognized that the Confessing movement's primary concern is with those within the church who might be seen as compromising their conviction, moderates wonder how the missionary cause could possibly be helped by our church declaring at this late date that whole classes, categories, and groups of the human race are lost, and by announcing this determination as a first word of approach and appeal? James Barr remarks, "Evangelical faith can seem to set one apart from one's own past within the church, and can lead to the idea that the essentials of the faith are unknown in other segments of its membership." He also says, "When it is pressed further and made into the central operating principle of one's relation to the church, it has gone too far."⁴⁵

Old theology—new technology

Evangelicalism has been described as a reaction against modernity,⁴⁶ but has also moved aggressively in some ways to seize modernity. Evangelicals have acted boldly to make use of television, computers, and the Internet to spread their message, and this zeal can also be seen in the paradox whereby, in the Presbyterian world, congregations that are most likely to embrace technology, such as elaborate sound amplification and recorded music in worship, are also likely to stress most strenuously a received "orthodoxy" from the pulpit, and vice versa. But analysis shows that pulpit themes have changed remarkably over decades, even among ministers fervently committed to the "old time religion."

Still, it is worth noting that, in contrast to the upheavals of the 1960s when experimentation in worship was seen as "liberal," a disproportionate number of contemporary conservative Presbyterian churches have rejected traditional models of worship. Many Confessing/New Wineskin churches are new church developments based on the non-denominational "seeker's model," which disavows traditional patterns of

⁴⁴Lutheran scholar Martin E. Marty examines the dilemma of mainstream Christian encounter with radical fundamentalisms and suggests the use of the "ancient Christian practice of hospitality" as a means of engagement. *When Faiths Collide* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

⁴⁵*Fundamentalism*, 340.

⁴⁶Bruce B. Lawrence, *Defenders of God: The Fundamentalist Revolt against the Modern Age* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1989).

worship and makes use of contemporary music popular in the secular sphere—much of which, while employing a very modern beat, is strikingly conservative in its message.

A question of numbers

Former General Assembly Moderator of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Jack Rogers, an evangelical who has gravitated toward moderating views, has stated that about 15% of Presbyterians hold evangelical views, 10% left-liberal views, while 75% constitute a ‘broad middle’ that feels threatened on both sides.⁴⁷

This analysis is reflected in the fact that in the current debates over homosexuality, some 1,316 PC(USA) churches have endorsed the conservative “Confessing Movement,” about fifty-four churches support the “More Light” movement that is defiantly opposed to the *Book of Order* ban on the ordination of practicing homosexuals in committed relationships. Meanwhile, there are more than 9,500 Presbyterian congregations that have not allied with a special interest group on the ordination question—perhaps ‘the broad middle’ of which Rogers speaks.⁴⁸

Evangelicals have charged that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)’s decline in membership is due to its embrace of liberal policies. But the period of decline also coincides with the long period of conflict over ideology that has marked these debates. One could also argue that many who hold more liberal views have also left the church—often to no religious affiliation at all—because they believe their church’s views are inadequate to or irrelevant for the intellectual and social challenges of the current situation. Moreover, a careful analysis of denominational statistics shows that many “Confessing Churches” and “contemporary worship” churches have also declined in membership—in proportions just as serious as have more mainstream congregations.⁴⁹ Groups such as the Presbyterian Church in America and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church have depended upon the recruitment of new congregations, rather than membership increases in existing congregations, for their impressive growth statistics.

Gay ordination

⁴⁷See Jack Rogers, *Claiming the Center: Churches and Conflicting Worldviews* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1995).

⁴⁸The geographic location of these churches is interesting and predictable. ‘More Light’ churches tend to be downtown, urban congregations, while ‘Confessing’ churches tend to be suburban. Small town and rural churches tend to be ‘middle of the road.’ This is because gay persons tend to live in downtown areas of larger cities, whereas heterosexual couples with families gravitate toward the suburbs. Struggling small town churches must accommodate all worshippers, and even if they do not have many homosexual members. Gay children and grandchildren have grown up in these churches and moved to the cities, but are still part of the small town and rural congregations’ consciousness. Because the numerical growth and financial strength of the PC(USA) lies in its suburban churches, the Confessing Movement can claim both numbers and money for its perspective. But, in a sense, the struggling small town and rural churches of the PC(USA) are ‘caught’ in a war being fought between its urban and suburban congregations. See Gibson Winter, *The Suburban Captivity of the Churches* (New York: Macmillan, 1962).

⁴⁹Claims of numerical rapid growth in congregations served by high-powered ministers are often not validated by General Assembly statistical reports.

It should be remembered that advocacy groups in the PC(USA) are asking only for permission to ordain otherwise qualified homosexual persons in faithful, monogamous relationships. While agreeing with the PC(USA) in affirming the uniqueness of marriage and upholding the biblical institution as God's design for human happiness and fulfillment, the Confessing/New Wineskins movements raises opposition to homosexuality to the level of the church's highest affirmation. Thus, for the first time, opposition to homosexuality would become one of three distinctives, along with the infallibility of Scripture and the limitation of grace to those who call upon Jesus. Granting that fidelity in marriage and chastity in singleness are inestimably important in the happiness and well-being of creation, mainstream leaders ask whether the church should declare that this matter, and *only* this one, is worthy of being one of only three distinctives raised to the level of ultimate doctrinal affirmation. To put it another way, should opposition to homosexuality become *the* sole social position by which God's people are to be recognized?

Professor Robert A. J. Gagnon, of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, addressed the New Wineskins Convocation in Tulsa, Oklahoma, July 21, 2006. He asked, "How important is the two-sex prerequisite for marriage? Scripture treats it as a foundational matter that takes precedence even over fidelity, monogamy, and non-incestuous bonds. In other words, homosexual practice is regarded by Scripture as an even more serious violation of sexual norms than incest, adultery, plural marriage, and divorce. Would you stay in a denomination that approved any of those forms of behavior?"

He continued by observing [Paul's] words in 1 Cor. 5 that the Corinthians, rather than tolerating the behavior of the incestuous man and accommodating it, should have mourned because this person is at risk of being excluded from the kingdom of God (so 1 Cor. 6:9-11). So take the following action that his life might be spared on the Day of the Lord; namely, temporary exclusion from the life of the community in order to bring the offender to his senses. That's true love. It's not the Corinthians who love the incestuous man. It's Paul who loves the incestuous man.

Dr. Gagnon remarked, "So don't tell me that affirming homosexual practice is all about love. Homosexual practice is an even greater violation than incest because the reason why incest is wrong is predicated on the assumption that 'you shall not have sex with the flesh of your own flesh' (Lev. 18:6), that is, with someone who is already a same on a familial level. That's sex with yourself, not with a complementary 'other.'"

He stated that, "The need for complementary otherness is felt even more deeply in the matter of sexual otherness, which is more clearly enconced in the creation texts than incest. Genesis 2:21-24 posits an original, sexually undifferentiated human split down the 'side' (not 'rib'). The fact that one flesh becomes two sexes grounds the principle that these two sexes may become one flesh. When Paul talks about homosexual practice in Rom. 1:24-27 and 1 Cor. 6:9, he echoes Gen. 1:27 and 2:24. He's a good 'learner' or disciple of Jesus, because when Jesus talked about sexuality in Mark 10, the two texts that he pinpoints as normative and prescriptive for all matters involving human sexual ethics are these very two texts, Gen. 1:27, 'male and female He made them,' and Gen.

2:24, ‘for this reason a man may become joined to a woman and the two become one flesh.’”

Dr. Gagnon concluded, saying that, “The whole basis for predicating marital monogamy—the twoness of the sexual union at any one time or serially—is Gen. 1:27, ‘God made us male and female,’ the twoness of the sexes. If we eliminate that sexual standard, then there will be no other Scripture-based, logic-based, or nature-based reason by which you might proscribe committed sexual unions involving three or more persons—according to Jesus. That doesn’t mean that polyamory (i.e., multiple partners in a consensual, committed sexual bond) is worse than homosexual practice. It is less worse because the basis for proscribing polyamory is the two-sex prerequisite given in marriage.”⁵⁰

This Confessing Movement’s declaration makes no room for the question raised by biblical scholars whether the type of homosexuality condemned in Scripture is the same as that practiced by those committed, same-sex couples who plead for the church’s tolerance. Moreover, in neither the Hebrew nor Christian Testaments is there evidence that homosexuals were ever as stringently punished as the texts themselves require: “they are to be cut off from the people of God,” says Leviticus, while St. Paul affirms in Romans that “they shall not see the kingdom of God.” Even the most zealous in the Confessing Movement—I take it—would recoil at the execution of homosexual persons as, say, Afghanistan’s Taliban would require. Having allowed for grace, therefore, the question of “how much grace” becomes a legitimate subject for debate.⁵¹

Ordination of homosexuals is one of the most controversial subjects in the history of Christian thought, and appropriately so. The dilemma has occupied center stage in secular culture for a decade, energizing partisans on all sides. At least the church is not debating an issue that people think obscure! Still, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) comes to its present debate having failed to resolve a basic question some conservatives raise as to whether a homosexual person may be regarded as a Christian, for the condemnatory texts in both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures are absolute and severe. According to this argument, Presbyterians have made an artificial distinction between inclination and practice, for Jesus said that if a man looks upon a woman with lust in his heart, he is guilty of adultery. Surely, the argument goes, the same applies to same-sex attractions. Critics argue that the New Testament knows no distinction between orientation and action, and therefore some have asserted that the current Presbyterian compromise is unworkable and cannot be enforced, and that the resulting “solution” must either be much more sweeping and conservative, or more sweeping and liberal than has been heretofore contemplated.⁵²

⁵⁰Robert A. Gagnon, transcription of audio taped address, to R. Milton Winter, 27 January 2007.

⁵¹See Jack Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2006).

⁵²It should be noted that the parallel Confessing Movement in United Methodism—allied with Asbury Seminary in Kentucky—has successfully pursued judicial decisions in that communion, which allow pastors to exclude homosexual persons from membership in congregations on the basis of orientation not practice.

The only way a person's particular inclination and intention in sexual matters can be ascertained is by examination. The specter of public interrogation of potential nominees and candidates for ordained office in the church as to their past and present sexual behavior, and their future resolves in this regard, has already begun, and since officers are ordained for the whole church, it is a necessary corollary to this idea, that members of one congregation or presbytery, being unsatisfied with the determinations of another governing body, may seek to bring discipline, as they understand it, to those situations. Again, this process is already underway. As a result, it becomes more difficult to find qualified persons who will consider nomination for church office—who, for reasons of modesty or rectitude, are unwilling to subject themselves to demeaning exposure and questioning with the consequent possibility of public embarrassment. (I refer to the ongoing case involving an unmarried elder in the First Presbyterian church of Greenwich, Connecticut, whom evangelicals in a neighboring congregation seek to remove from office because, having asserted that he has created no public scandal and states that he lives in conformity with the church's Constitution, disputes the necessity of having to answer questions concerning his sexual orientation.)

Returning to the question whether this issue is worthy of elevation to a three-pronged assertion of essential Presbyterianism, evangelicals might ask, for example, what of such pressing concerns as abortion, euthanasia, stem-cell research, cloning, civil rights, prayer in the schools, gambling and substance abuse, domestic violence, divorce on non-biblical grounds, and any number of other controverted ethical issues in the church to-day? Why is an issue that involves a small segment of the population and probably a much smaller proportion of Presbyterians, being elevated to such importance and being made the test of ecclesiastical fellowship in our day? It seems that abortion, which is a life and death matter to evangelicals, would be of greater concern than homosexuality, which is merely a "choice" (in evangelical parlance). The Roman Catholic Church has judged abortion to be of far greater significance than homosexuality, as far as church priorities are concerned.

Divergent methods of biblical interpretation

Jack Rogers—author of an important General Assembly study "On the Nature and Use of Biblical Authority"—argues that Presbyterians employ at least two major techniques of biblical interpretation. One, favored by fundamentalists and most evangelicals—regards all passages of Scripture as equally authoritative, while the other—claiming the sanction of the Westminster Confession—erects certain "ruling texts" as guides for other passages.⁵³

Moreover, certain interpreters of the Bible assume that they can know exactly what the biblical authors were thinking without any knowledge of ancient languages or cultures.

⁵³See Jack Rogers and Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979). The Westminster Confession teaches that "the infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture, is the Scripture itself; and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any scripture (which is not manifold but one), it may be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly" (Chap.1:9).

This is the idea that truth is obvious to the humblest inquirer, and the task of the interpreter is to collect all the disparate “facts” of the Bible, and arrange and present them in their relation to each other—granting each equal authority.

It should be noted that the Presbyterian church does not regard all matters spoken of or taught in Scripture as essential to be believed, or normative for the practice of the church. The PC(USA) vow, as adopted from the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, specifically focuses the authority of Scripture upon its “unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ,” specifying its determinative character to matters of faith and salvation, but very pointedly *not* to matters of history, science, or culturally conditioned social mores.

Just as in past debates over race, women’s ordination, divorce, and the like, the current debates over sexuality cannot be resolved simply by appeals to the Bible, for both sides claim Scripture on their behalf.⁵⁴ Each side, moreover, claims to maintain the highest respect for Scripture and believes that the Bible’s teaching underlies their beliefs. The question of “ruling texts” is thus brought to the fore.

Towards a different polity

Evangelicals, as well as liberals, in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) often act as if the church’s polity is different from what it is. While conservatives charge that certain ordaining bodies have acted in defiance of the Constitution to ordain gay or lesbian ministers and officers, conservatives also act at times as if the *Book of Order* reads differently than it does. This is especially true of questions related to the local ownership of church property, the right of a congregation to withdraw from presbytery, and the responsibility of presbytery to inquire into causes of division within a local church.⁵⁵ When conservative churches attempt to withdraw from presbyteries, conservatives declare that presbyteries ought to discount the *Book of Order* clear statement that all church property is held in trust for the use and benefit of the denomination. Efforts to amend the *Book of Order* to substitute a property chapter written along lines acceptable to New Wineskin leaders were defeated at the 2006 General Assembly.⁵⁶

Local option

⁵⁴Almost forgotten are the massive biblical treatises produced in defense of racial segregation, not only in South Africa, but in the American South as well. One of the best known and most widely distributed was by President Guy T. Gillespie of Belhaven College in Jackson, Mississippi and published by the White Citizens’ Council of Greenwood, Mississippi. See G. T. Gillespie, “A Christian View on Segregation,” reprint of an address before the Synod of Mississippi of the Presbyterian Church, U. S., 4 November 1954 (Greenwood, MS: Citizens Council, n.d.). Similar arguments were brought forward by Morton H. Smith in a book written to encourage conservative withdrawal from the PCUS. See Morton H. Smith, *How Is the Gold Become Dim: The Decline of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.* (n.p., Steering Committee for a Continuing Presbyterian Church, 1973), 153.

⁵⁵See Lloyd J. Luncford, *A Guide to Church Property Law: Theological, Constitutional, and Practical Considerations* (Lenoir, N.C.: Presbyterian Lay Committee, 2006).

⁵⁶See the recent Advisory Opinion on Church Property issued by the Office of the General Assembly, <http://www.pcusa.org/constitutionalservices/ad-op/note11.htm>.

Nathan O. Hatch has argued that the development of American Christianity has been an inexorable process toward greater and greater individual liberty for thought and practice.⁵⁷ Students of American religion have predicted a coming era of “post-denominationalism,” when organized religion will become almost completely an individual and congregational phenomenon.

In the present controversy, liberals in the PC(USA) seem to want a system that amounts to “local option.” This was the leeway for which conservatives appealed and were denied during the controversies over women’s ordination in an earlier era. But since various parties have argued for the idea of local option at various times in Presbyterian history, it would seem that the idea has merit within the general framework of our polity. The right of Southern presbyteries (but generally not presbyteries of the old UPCUSA) to examine ministers ordained elsewhere is an example of a kind of local option, premised as it seems to be on the fact that persons ordained and acceptable in one part of the church might not be acceptable in another.

The Confessing/New Wineskin appeal for local option in matters of property ownership can be seen in this light. However, it is difficult to see how the principle, if granted on one point, will not have to be extended to many. Individualism characterizes post-modern thought, but since conservatives who have sought maximum enforcement power through legal means to prevent the ordination of gay persons now intend to join denominations that lack means of enforcement (due to the voluntary nature of membership in presbytery), the question arises whether strict enforcement of anti-gay ordination rules is the chief motivating factor in current withdrawal efforts.

Moreover, since Presbyterian theological trends have tended to mirror the political and social ethos that the various proponents inhabit, it may be that the current phenomena are an ecclesiastical reflection of current realignments taking place in the secular political parties. Such may be inevitable. Still, one may hope that Presbyterians (at least in the church’s broad middle) may continue to perform the important “bridge” function for which mainstream Presbyterians have been known. Such a role is crucial, for the Presbyterian church has been one of the few institutions in America in which people, however imperfectly, have come together across economic, social, class, and political divides.⁵⁸

An apostate church?

These debates come at a time when many lament a decline of civility in public discourse, and the possibility that this has intruded into the life of the church is real in light of the fact that the *Presbyterian Layman* newspaper declared the 2001 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) an “apostate assembly” (refusing even to

⁵⁷Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1989).

⁵⁸One is reminded of Cyrus McCormick’s observation in 1859 that the Presbyterian Church was one of two hoops that held the nation together, the other being the Democratic Party. The party divided in the elections of 1860 and the Presbyterians in the summer of 1861.

use the words “General Assembly” to describe the gathering) and has in 2006 denounced its spiritual authority over the church it was elected to represent.

Such language represents (used, we are assured by the editor who stated in the summer of 2001 that he was “fully aware of gravity of the charge”) the strongest possible theological language, reserved in our tradition only for the most extreme declensions of doctrine.

In fact, such language has never been officially used by a mainstream American Presbyterian assembly (even in the darkest hours of the American Civil War) against another Reformed church in this country. It is worth noting that the PCA General Assembly has debated on several occasions whether to declare the PC(USA) General Assembly apostate, but each time has refrained from doing so.

The condemnation of Roman Catholicism by the Protestant Reformers was strict enough, but the term apostasy is not found in Calvin’s *Institutes* with regard to any church. Moreover, Reformed ecclesiology holds that only a duly constituted synod of the whole church, acting in solemn judicial assembly, may make such judgments—hence the Westminster Assembly’s declaration “that there is no other head of the church but the Lord Jesus Christ. Nor can the Pope of Rome, in any sense be head thereof; but is that antichrist, that man of sin, and son of perdition, that exalteth himself, in the church, against Christ, and all that is called God.”⁵⁹

This action to declare the General Assembly apostate, as well as publications and seminars on ways congregations may leave the denomination with their property, is therefore most unfortunate, coming as it does before the present issues have been fully decided in the judicial councils of the church. While enraging the liberal side of the church, some evangelicals also see that such actions will have a dispiriting effect upon fellow conservatives, many of whom appear inclined to give up and walk away. Although the fidelity-chastity amendment was being upheld, as of January 2002 by a nearly eight-to-one majority, the withdrawal of evangelical churches from the PC(USA) had begun.

Here, too, it is worth noting that when “Amendment B” (prohibiting the ordination of persons who did not live in fidelity in marriage or chastity in singleness) was passed, the liberal side did not declare the General Assembly ‘apostate,’ but merely expressed disappointment that these issues were being raised to the level of religious tests. Evangelicals must assume some responsibility for their strident language, for no other group in the church has resorted to such. Many have remarked upon the intense anger toward the church exhibited by persons at both ends of the theological spectrum, but

⁵⁹Chap. XXV:6. This passage has since been modified by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), but is cited here to illustrate that statements of such gravity were made by Presbyterians only in duly constituted assemblies of the whole church. It is further worth noting that the condemnation was applied only to the papal office and not to the Church of Rome as such. Also worth noting in the present context is Westminster Confession’s own caution that “All synods or councils since the apostles’ times, whether general or particular, may err, and many have erred: therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith or practice, but used as a help in both” (Chap. XXXI:3), and that “the purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error” (Chap. XXV:5). Citations are from the original text.

particularly in the conservative wing, as evidenced by letters and editorials of the influential Presbyterian Lay Committee's newspaper and Web site. Psychologists such as Wayne E. Oates in his book *When Religion Gets Sick* have commented that, for some, religion becomes an organized expression of anger. The same observation can be made in the political arena at the far extremes of issue polarities.⁶⁰

What if conscience dictates withdrawal?

American Presbyterians early defined the limits of conscience and the procedure for its exercise within the body of Christ. When the authority of the Westminster Confession and Catechisms was first defined for the American church, the Synod of Philadelphia (then the church's highest governing body) enacted a compromise in 1729 between those who wanted unqualified subscription to the standards and those who objected to such strictness.⁶¹ The synod declared that "in case any minister of this Synod or any candidate for the ministry, shall have any scruple with respect to any article or articles of said Confession or Catechisms, he shall at the time of his making said declaration declare his sentiments to the Presbytery or Synod, who shall notwithstanding, admit him to the exercise of the ministry within our bounds, and to ministerial communion, if the Synod or Presbytery shall judge his scruple or mistake to be only about articles not essential and necessary in doctrine, worship, or government."⁶²

When Old and New Side Presbyterians reunited in 1758 (they divided, in part, when the Old Side abrogated the compromise of 1729 and required absolute subscription to the Confession of Faith and Catechisms), the Synod of New York and Philadelphia resolved that "when any matter is determined by a major vote, every member shall either actively concur with, or passively submit to such determination; or, if his conscience will permit him to do neither, he shall, after sufficient liberty modestly to reason and remonstrate, peaceably withdraw from our communion, without attempting to make any schism."⁶³

In enacting the Reunion of 1758 the synod also specified that "it shall be esteemed and treated as a censurable evil, to accuse any member of heterodoxy, insufficiency, or immorality, in a calumniating manner, or otherwise than by private brotherly admonition, or by a regular process according to our known rules of judicial trial in cases of scandal."

Theology matters

The past sixty years have shown Presbyterian evangelicals in the U.S.A. calling again and again for the dismemberment of the church, and at least four times in this century they have acted to bring this about. The issues were highly charged at the time, but now

⁶⁰Wayne E. Oates, *When Religion Gets Sick* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970).

⁶¹There has been an amazing diversity of strictness in the way various Presbyterian bodies have subscribed to the Westminster Confession and catechisms from the time of its first promulgation until the present.

⁶²Here it is clear that from the first definition of doctrinal standards in the American Church, the right to decide which portions of the church's teaching are essential and non-essential for ministers has been granted to the presbytery in its responsibility for examination and ordination.

⁶³It should be noted that this refers to individual action only; the synod did not envision the departure of congregations or presbyteries.

many seem to have been ephemeral. Always it was hoped that the realignments would bring peace, but this has never been the case.

Finally, it might be hoped, Christians might look for a different way to define their terms for fellowship or to resolve their issues of debate. For all their protesting that they believe in the sovereignty of God and their confession that the church's future cannot be assured by human machinations, evangelicals have failed to rely upon, or to trust in, God's election in the composition of the church's membership, or to wait upon divine determination in the resolution of its disputes. It is a high standard that demands agreement in all things as a basis for communion, particularly in a denomination that lists as a first principle of its governance, "that God alone is Lord of the conscience."

Because Presbyterian evangelicals rely upon what appears to be an Anabaptist doctrine of the church, it is likely that their present efforts to build and reform Presbyterianism will be a false trail. Anabaptist theology—insisting as it does upon the necessity of a personal conversion experience that is intelligible to one's fellow believers—can only find the existence of the church in local manifestations. This seems to be the only solution that is workable for evangelicals, and while it is a theology that can build a strong local church, the result is not Presbyterian, and never can be. This is the basic conflict between a theology that is based upon experience and one grounded in divine election. Similarly, disputes in the church must be resolved in the one through experience and in the other by reliance upon the oft inscrutable will of Almighty God.

The rapprochement envisioned by Billy Graham and others in the Neo-Evangelical movement of the 1950s between fundamentalists and the mainline church seems largely to have failed. Evangelicals have not persevered in their commitment to work within the structures of the mainstream churches, and they are notoriously famous for not being able to work with each other in their own. Such seems to be the nature of the movement—a consequence of its individualistic theology and atomized doctrine of the church. But one fact seems clear: Those who identify themselves as both Presbyterian and Evangelical—to the extent the loyalties overlap—will, as their compatriots in every generation, eventually be forced by evangelicalism's insistence upon theological hegemony, to choose their greater loyalty.

Experts in conflict management point out that, in church quarrels, the dynamics are often sub-rational or irrational, and that what people *say* they are fighting about and what they **are** fighting about can be entirely different things. Therefore, it is sometimes not realistic to think that arguments can be won with logical points. The issue is often "power," not "truth," so that "truth" becomes hostage to power.

Keeping in mind John Leith's reminder that there are "fundamentalisms of the left as well as the right," one can remark that fundamentalisms, uneasy as they are with nuance, tend to sharpen beliefs, rather like placing the weight of an inverted pyramid, upon one single point, which becomes a sort of test, or last hope, upon which the defense of the entire ideology—if not the fate of civilization—rests; thus, to allow any modification or change of principle at this key point runs the risk—in their view—of allowing the entire

system that has come to be focused in this place to collapse like a house of cards. This explains the “all or nothing, my way or the highway” attitude of fundamentalists. To compromise, to “dialogue,” to “embrace pluralism,” to “hold views in tension” upsets the hourglass and there is then nothing to prevent all the sand from running out. Conservative fundamentalism is particularly liable to this view; it views change itself as an enemy. Christ is “the same, yesterday, today, and forever.” Thus, Satan, being the opposite of Christ, is the whisperer of change. The serpent’s question in the garden, “Hath God said?” proposes change, and all change since Eden, has represented a declension from the primeval paradise of God.

Only the regenerative grace of Christ that undoes the changes of Eden is positive change, and this underscores the function of all religion, which is essentially conservative. The Christian’s goal is heaven, where the absence of day and night indicates the essential changelessness of God’s will and those who find security therein. One might counter such views by saying that the Christian was made to live on earth, and that the final promise of the gospel is resurrection to a new heavens and earth, and that the earth being formed, according to Genesis, through a processes of changes called forth and guided by God, that change itself is built in to what it means to be creatures in creation, and that in itself, change is not an enemy but part of the divine design.

Many arguments debated among Presbyterians seem familiar to observers—the issue of evolution, for example, has been debated almost continuously since the 1860s. The question of abortion has been discussed for decades. Many arguments are put forth with much less intellectual rigor than in earlier days. The whole issue of “staying in or pulling out” has been argued *ad infinitum*.⁶⁴ It is as if proponents and opponents have grown tired, but have no idea how to move to a new place in the debates. The same is true in the smaller Presbyterian denominations, where issues such as abstinence from liquor, opposition to birth control, prohibition of membership in the Masonic orders, the ordination of women, and so forth, consume much energy and provide little fresh thought.

Inherent dangers in ecclesiastical division

Dissenting bodies are able to unite as long as they face a common opponent. Once the opponent is gone, centrifugal forces begin to manifest themselves. This has been true of all four 20th-century divisions occurring among Presbyterians in the United States. Evangelicals withdrawing from the PC(USA) at this juncture face difficulty as they attempt to embrace major changes made over the past six decades, such as union of Presbyterians across sectional lines, racial integration, and the ordination of women, but “freeze” things at the place where they now find their theological level of comfort.

Each major conservative withdrawal—the Orthodox Presbyterians in 1936, the PCA in 1973, the Evangelical Presbyterians in 1980—has produced a church that embraced

⁶⁴For a thorough discussion of these debates, see R. Milton Winter, “Division & Reunion in the Presbyterian Church, U.S.: A Mississippi Retrospective,” *Journal of Presbyterian History* 78 (Spring 2000): 67-86.

certain “progressive” ideas its predecessor resists. In the present situation, the ordination of women is proving to be a sticking point. The earlier withdrawing churches (even though the EPC permits the ordination of women) have not embraced women’s ordination—indeed the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and the PCA define themselves against it. Thus, it is likely that if Confessing/New Wineskin churches withdraw, yet another denomination will appear.⁶⁵ In an ironic sense, the appearance of all these groups with their various gradations of change bears testimony to the influence of “liberalism,” although in a retrograde form. As such, any newly formed denomination is likely to be unstable—for having embraced some departures from what might be called “consistent Presbyterian orthodoxy,” it will be subject to the same pressures that have caused the present PC(USA) to consider further extensions of the so-called “theologies of inclusion.”

The presence of a strong charismatic element in the Confessing/New Wineskins movement is likely to accentuate this tendency, relying as it does on experience rather than Scripture as its ultimate authority. The charismatic emphasis on styles of worship to which conservative Presbyterians may not be accustomed is also likely to deny any attempt to create a new church that will preserve the *status quo*.⁶⁶

For those who cope with change

Some have suggested that one task of religion is to help people cope with change, and that church leaders ought to recognize that people accept change at different rates of speed. Southern Presbyterian conservatives opposed the abolition of slavery, amendment of the Westminster Confession, the ordination of women, racial integration, union with the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., broader grounds for blessing remarriage after divorce, the concept of a Book of Confessions, and the use of non-gender specific language in translating Scripture. Each time they brought forth a full arsenal of biblical arguments to oppose the change; yet, most evangelicals who stayed with the mainstream church now support these changes, and indeed, the evangelical publishing houses later offered books arguing for these positions using the biblical texts adduced to support the “liberal” position of past generations.

The Rev. Harry S. Hassall, a longtime leader of Southern Presbyterian conservatives, has remarked as to how in the 1960s he did not know a single conservative in the old PCUS who held a “high” (to conservatives) view of biblical authority and also accepted

⁶⁵Similarly, the smaller evangelically oriented Presbyterian bodies—Orthodox Presbyterian, Bible Presbyterian, and the Presbyterian Church in America have each suffered multiple divisions, some of them quite significant. Recently, Morton H. Smith, a former professor at Reformed Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi, and formerly moderator and stated clerk of the PCA denomination has founded an independent seminary and declared that the PCA is “teetering on the brink of apostasy.” The denomination is facing action by its entire Louisiana Presbytery to withdraw from the denomination to unite with other congregations to form a “purer” church, once more devoted to “Biblical principles.”

⁶⁶For reasons that have yet to be explained, more liberal Presbyterians seem to favor the traditional forms of worship—the forms specified in the directory of worship of the Presbyterian *Book of Order*, whereas ministers who are otherwise “conservative” are generally more willing to experiment with alternate styles of worship and church music.

the idea of racial integration. Hassall perceived that many seminarians of the time rejected traditional views of the Bible's authority because they assumed that racial justice and biblical authority were incompatible. Walter Elwell, a professor at Belhaven College in the 1970s, remarked that *Southerners* accepted change a generation later than the rest of the country. The observation was apt and could help the church in understanding its pastoral task.

But the point must not be lost that in each past battle, conservatives have opposed change because of their strong belief that *biblical truth* required their opposition. Past history shows that it is virtually impossible for the Presbyterian church to confront major change in policy without a hemorrhage from its right flank. Such may be the inevitable psychological and spiritual price of faithfulness, but it may also point to the church's need to better accommodate the sensitivities of those for whom change is difficult.

The pain and promise of denominational loyalty

Evangelicalism has always acknowledged that it is not the church, but a movement *within* the church. Indeed, evangelicalism may be defined as *a movement that uses the church*. No doubt the movement has also enlarged and strengthened the church, but because evangelicals tend not to regard the visible church as a spiritual entity, and because of their individualistic approach to salvation, it has proved difficult to forge lasting and trustful relationships between Presbyterians oriented toward work through denominational structures and their evangelical compatriots who undertake cooperative work in a highly fluid and informal way. These observations may reveal a fundamental and perhaps irresolvable conflict between being a "consistent evangelical" and the ability to embrace the connectional church. Indeed, Martin Marty has written, "No story of estrangement and divorce within inherited denominational patterns has been more intense in recent decades than between 'everyone else' and the fundamentalist."⁶⁷ But until these differences are decisively addressed, there will be continuing division and loss of congregations and clergy from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and positive evangelicals will be stymied in the influence they are attempting to exert.

It has been said that there is no quarrel worse than a church fight. Charles Kimball has written that, although "religion is arguably the most powerful and pervasive force on earth, and its ideas and commitments have inspired individuals and communities of faith to transcend narrow self-interest in pursuit of higher values and truths, at the same time history clearly shows that religion has often been linked to the worst examples of human behavior."⁶⁸ Gaining knowledge of the human and spiritual aspects of religious quarrels is essential to religious progress in the 21st century—an era that has been marked by ferocious religious tensions the world over.

H. M. Kuitert, of Amsterdam's Free University, whose remarkable best-selling theology handbook for laypersons has gone through twelve printings, has said, "The

⁶⁷*When Faiths Collide*, 57.

⁶⁸Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2002), 1.

Church is a Summary of All Frustrations.”⁶⁹ This tongue-in-cheek comment reminds us that, as Luther said, “There is no more bitter people than the saints.” And yet, those who read this also know, as Augustine said, “the Church is the mother of us all.”

An answer for Presbyterians is to remember that the ground of our calling in the church is not agreement in doctrine or even participation in mission, but the mysterious calling and election of God. Since God’s gifts and call are irrevocable (Rom. 11:29), as I see it, our unity in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is not a choice. Christ said, “You did not choose me, but I chose you, and appointed you that you should bear much fruit and that your fruit should abide” (John 15:16). We are together, not because we agree, but in answer to a divine summons. In spite of ourselves, we may have some role to play in God’s kingdom. Let us hope that this may be so, and that the fruit we bear may abide.

Finally, because our Reformed understanding of election is not to privilege or dominance, but to humble service after the example of Christ, it would seem that modesty and humility ought to be the first response of Christian people to disagreement and quarrels in the spiritual community. The church exists by the call and purpose of Almighty God, and it will be sustained and prosper only according to the divine will. As *A Declaration of Faith*, a confessional document used by the old PCUS, declared, “Our purpose is to discern God’s working in the world and to join him there.” We must remember that what unites Christians is much greater than what divides them. We cannot guarantee the future, but we can place our trust in Jesus Christ, who has promised concerning the church for which he died and rose again: “The gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”⁷⁰

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⁶⁹H. M. Kuitert, *I Have My Doubts: How to Become a Christian without Being a Fundamentalist* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1993).

⁷⁰See Clifton Kirkpatrick and William H. Hopper Jr., *What Unites Presbyterians: Common Ground for Troubled Times* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 1997).