

Descent of Mainline Presbyterianism in America

I. The Neo-Orthodox Consensus

A. Situation in 1930s

1. PCUSA rejected confessional discipline in 1920s: Where would it go from here?
2. “Orthodoxy” (in whatever form) became the business of the presbyteries
3. By informal agreement (not coercion) church came to a “Neo-Orthodox Consensus” into the 1960s
4. Embodied by John Mackay, president of Princeton Seminary (1936-59)

B. What is Neo-Orthodoxy?

1. Karl Barth
 - a. Launched Neo-Orthodoxy with commentary on Romans after World War I because of the bankruptcy of liberalism
 - b. Of Swiss *Reformed* background: Influenced by Calvinism
 - c. Emerged in America in 1930s, with Niebuhr brothers (Reinhold and Richard)
2. The “orthodox” part
 - a. Rejected liberal optimism—“realistic theology” that admitted sin
 - b. Used orthodox concepts/terminology (transcendence of God, “original sin”)
 - c. These qualities probably attracted some conservatives—to the label at least
3. The “Neo” part
 - a. Accepted liberal higher criticism
 - b. Viewed different kinds of “history”
 - 1) History which is subject to historical criticism
 - 2) “Salvation history” which is a matter of faith
 - c. God spoke *through* the Scripture (a means of revelation but not a revelation)
 - d. Stress on social ethics
4. Even Princeton fell by the 1940s

C. Confession of 1967

1. Height of Neo-Orthodox influence in Presbyterian Church
2. Specifically repudiated the Westminster Confession
 - a. Westminster: Scripture as the Word of God
 - b. 1967: Christ as the incarnate Word of God *witnessed* by Scripture
3. Repudiated confessional authority by saying that all “problems and crises” must be judged on an individual basis
4. Failed utterly to provide UPCUSA a basis of unity & identity
5. Compiled a *Book of Confessions* → none binding

D. Post-1967

1. Neo-Orthodoxy splintered into other forms of liberal theology: Liberation, Black, Feminist, etc.
2. Polity not doctrine became the basis of discipline, the “glue,” that holds the PCUSA together
3. Theologically (and many other ways) a *pluralistic* church—and proud of it

II. Reunions

A. Influenced by the rise of the ecumenical movement

1. World Missionary Congress at Edinburgh (1910)
 - a. Birthplace of modern ecumenical movement

- b. Promoted missionary cooperation
 - c. Led to organizations formed that led to WCC
 - 2. Expressions
 - a. World Council of Churches (1948)
 - b. USA: National Council of Churches (c. 1950, from the Federal Council of Churches of 1908)
 - c. Federated union (e.g., WCC) vs. Organic union (e.g., PCUSA)
 - B. Merged with United Presbyterian Church (1958) to form UPCUSA
 - 1. UPCNA (1858-1958) → union of groups from Covenanter/Seceder backgrounds
 - 2. Old UPCNA conservative on whole
 - a. But had adopted new confessions in 20th century (1925, 1945) that modified Westminster Standards
 - b. Not necessarily *strongly* conservative
 - C. 1983: Merged w/ PCUS
- ### III. Controversies
- A. Political Issues
 - 1. Leading figure: Eugene Carson Blake
 - a. Stated clerk of PCUSA who promoted ecumenical movement
 - b. Active in civil rights movement (e.g., March on Washington)
 - 2. 1950s-60s: Support of civil rights movement
 - 3. 1970s-80s: Women's issues
 - a. Ordination of women (1956)
 - b. Kenyon Case (1970s): No reservations allowed on women's ordination
 - c. Reflecting feminist theology: "Re-imagining God" Conference (1994)
 - 4. Since 1990s: Homosexuality
 - a. "More Light Presbyterians" lobbied for acceptance
 - b. In 2011 permitted presbyteries to ordain homosexuals
 - 5. In all cases, hierarchy/bureaucracy favored liberals while rank & file resisted
 - B. Protest movements
 - 1. Presbyterian League of Faith (1920s-30s): Led by Macartney and Machen but weakened by division
 - 2. Presbyterian Lay Committee—founded in response to Confession of 1967, dissolved in 2018
 - 3. Confessing Church Movement
 - a. Insists on salvation through Christ alone (rejects pluralism)
 - b. Opposes homosexuality and other immorality
 - c. Over 10% of PCUSA churches aligned with it
 - C. Divisions
 - 1. Evangelical Presbyterian Church
 - a. History
 - 1) Founded in 1981 as conservative alternative to PCUSA
 - 2) Spark: Kaseman Case—Admission of a United Church of Christ minister in 1980 who denied deity of Christ (also His sinlessness & resurrection)
 - 3) Like PCA, benefited from an "escape clause" (1983-91) after PCUSA merger
 - b. Broadly "Evangelical" more than historically "Presbyterian"
 - 1) "Freedom" Issues

- a) Open to Charismatic influence (congregational choice)
- b) Allows women ministers (congregational choice) → opposes *requiring* ordination of women
- 2) Allows “scruples” on “non-essential” points (judged by sessions & presbyteries) but insist on commitment to Westminster “system of doctrine”
- 3) Adopted an “Essentials of the Faith”: Seven orthodox points + an affirmation of the Bible—nothing specifically Reformed in it
- 4) Illustrates a mixture united only by opposition to liberalism
- 2. ECO: Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians
 - a. Positions
 - 1) Founded 2012 mostly as protest against PCUSA’s decision on homosexuality
 - 2) Affirms several historic Reformed confessions
 - 3) Affirms ordination of women
 - b. Character
 - 1) Basically seems to accept PCUSA as it existed pre-1960
 - 2) Evangelical although professing a mixed confessionalism
- 3. Conclusion: PCUSA is eroding but not disappearing