

## HISTORY OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN AMERICA (PCA)

The following article was written by *Kenneth S. Keys*, a ruling elder in the PCA and a key figure in the Concerned Presbyterians' organization, one of the four groups that was responsible for organizing the Presbyterian Church in America.

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### A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE DEVELOPMENTS IN THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN THE UNITED STATES (SOUTHERN) WHICH LED TO THE FORMATION OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN AMERICA

To really understand the 30 year struggle between the liberals and the conservatives in the Presbyterian Church U.S. which finally resulted in the formation of the Presbyterian Church in America, one must go back to the time when Dr. L. Nelson Bell (Billy Graham's father-in-law), a medical missionary in China, returned to the United States in the late thirties or early forties and started practicing medicine in Asheville, North Carolina.

It didn't take Dr. Bell long to realize that a relatively small group of liberal ministers and seminary professors in the Presbyterian Church in the United States--the so-called southern Church--were engaged in an organized effort to gain control of the church. These men led by Dr. Ernest Trice Thompson--a professor at Richmond Theological Seminary--formed a secret organization which they called "The Fellowship of St. James." They sought to have the church abandon its belief in the integrity and authority of the Bible, to water down the Westminster Confession of Faith, and to participate more actively in the National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches. Their primary goal, however, was to unite our church with the far more liberal and three times larger Presbyterian Church in the United States of America--the Northern Church.

These men would get together before meetings of presbytery, synod and general assembly, decide whom they would nominate for key positions, what motions would be made and who would present and speak to the motions. In effect they developed a political machine to control the actions of the church.

#### *SOUTHERN PRESBYTERIAN JOURNAL*

To let the members of the Presbyterian Church U.S. know about this attempt to undermine our historic faith and to encourage conservatives to resist the efforts of the liberals to gain complete control, Dr. Bell and Dr. Henry B. Dendy, minister at the Weaverville, North Carolina Presbyterian Church, founded the Southern Presbyterian Journal. Dr. Bell served as editor and Dr. Dendy as business manager.

By the early 1950's the liberals believed they had sufficient control to achieve their primary goal of uniting the Southern Church with the Northern Church. The 1954 General Assembly, dominated by the liberals, approved the union and sent it down to the presbyteries for the vote. They were so sure they would win that they did not oppose a conservative motion that the pros and cons of the union be widely debated over the church.

#### *UNION DEFEATED*

The Book of Church Order required that 3/4ths of the presbyteries had to approve a merger with another church body. There were 84 presbyteries. To defeat union 22 presbyteries would have to vote "no" on the union. We thought we could get that many and a few more to oppose the union but we realized that if the vote was fairly close the liberals would keep bringing up the merger every year and eventually they would succeed in their efforts to unite us with the Northern Church.

With Dr. Bell and several other speakers, I debated the issue with top liberal leaders. When all the presbyteries had voted, the count was 43 presbyteries opposed and 41 favoring the merger. God had blessed our efforts by giving us a clear majority. Following this loss the liberals, still in control at the Assembly level, temporarily abandoned their efforts to unite the church as a whole. Where they controlled enough votes in a synod or presbytery, they formed Union Synods and Union Presbyteries, violating the Book of Church Order by requiring only a majority vote.

By 1964 the secret “Fellowship of St. James” was no longer secret so they replaced it with a new and larger group which they called “The Fellowship of Concern.” They redoubled their efforts to merge our Southern Church with the far more liberal Northern Church. This group was in complete control of Assembly’s Nominating Committee, many of the synods and presbyteries, the board and agencies, colleges and seminaries and most of the important committees of the church.

Dr. Bell and a number of other conservative leaders met in Atlanta and concluded that informing church members regarding the direction the liberals were taking the church through the Presbyterian Journal would never return control to Bible-believing Presbyterians. They decided that an organization was needed to actively combat what the liberals were doing and that it would be a lay organization because if conservative ministers in liberal presbyteries became involved they could be defrocked.

#### *CONCERNED PRESBYTERIANS*

At the Journal board meeting in August of that year, I was asked to form and head such an organization. With \$15,000 seed money which the board provided, Concerned Presbyterians was formed in the fall of 1964 with Col. Roy LeCraw of Atlanta serving as vice president, W.J. (Jack) Williamson of Greenville, Alabama, as secretary and J. M. Vroon of Miami as treasurer.

By the time 50,000 copies of our bulletin-*THE CONCERNED PRESBYTERIAN*-were issued in March, 1965, we had enlisted Concerned Presbyterian chairmen in most of the presbyteries and trustees in most of the synods.

Our first bulletin listed these reasons for our concern:

#### **WE ARE CONCERNED:**

- because the primary mission of the church – winning people to Jesus Christ and nurturing them in the faith – is being compromised today by overemphasis on social, economic and political matters, forgetting the basic necessity for regeneration.
- because the integrity and authority of the Word of God are being questioned by dubious theories of revelation in some of the literature of the church.
- because some presbyteries no longer require complete loyalty to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms.
- because continued membership in the National Council of Churches involves us in activities, pronouncements and programs of which we strongly disapprove and repeated protests to that body have been ignored.
- because the plan to establish a central treasurer now approved by the General Assembly indicates a determination to regiment the benevolence giving of the church’s members by “equalizing” their gifts- in effect actually thwarting the wishes of many donors.
- because another determined effort has been started to effect a union of the Presbyterian Church U.S. with the United Presbyterian Church U.S.A- which is now engaged in negotiations to unite with denominations that do not adhere to the Reformed faith.

By this time many conservative members were leaving churches which were pastored by liberal ministers. In bold type on the first page of our bulletin was this statement: This is NOT the Answer... Concerned Presbyterians Inc. does NOT recommend that anyone withdraw from our beloved church. Our goal is to reverse the trends that are causing so many members to consider withdrawal. We should “stand fast and hold the traditions which ye have been taught.”

#### *PRESBYTERIAN EVANGELISTIC FELLOWSHIP*

When it became evident that those in control were no longer interested in evangelism, Rev. William P. Hill organized the Presbyterian Evangelistic Fellowship. Starting with two full-time evangelists they eventually had fifteen evangelists serving the church. Later on this group became a sending agency for missionaries so that our conservative churches which had stopped giving to the church’s Board of World Missions had missionaries whom they could support.

## PRESBYTERIAN CHURCHMEN UNITED

In 1969 more than 500 conservative ministers formed Presbyterian Churchmen United and ran <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> page statements of their beliefs in 29 or 30 leading newspapers.

Dr. John P. Richards, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Macon, Georgia, headed this organization and Rev. Paul P. Settle was its field director. They both played a very active role in speaking at conservative rallies, informing members in the pews regarding what the liberals were doing to the church. By this time presbyteries where the liberals were in control were receiving ministers who did not believe in the Virgin Birth, the validity of Christ's sacrificial death on the cross, His bodily resurrection and other cardinal doctrines of the faith.

The Board of World Missions was replacing conservative leading missionaries with men and women who no longer believed that leading the unsaved to Christ was their primary mission. The liberally controlled courts of the church made no effort to discipline a West Virginia minister who "married" two homosexuals at a church in Washington D. C., and a Louisville, Kentucky, minister who offered himself for a position as elector in the Communist Party. Some of the liberal presbyteries were blocking the efforts of conservative churches to call a conservative minister.

## CONCERN FOR OUR YOUTH

One of our most disturbing concerns was the determined effort being made by many liberal leaders to undermine not only the faith of our children and grandchildren but also their morals. In 1961 the National Council of Churches published and distributed a booklet entitled "The Meaning of Sex in Christian Life." Its text was a heart-to-heart talk between a church leader and a teenager.

On one page the church leader told the youth:

"Our culture declares that all sexual activity within marriage is legal, proper and good, while any such activity outside marriage is illicit, sinful and wrong. We know that there is sexual contact between unmarried couples that is motivated by love and which is pure and on occasions beautiful."

In 1969 or 1970 the church's Board of Christian Education joined with the Northern Church and the United Church of Christ in publishing a monthly magazine called *Colloquy*. Here are a few quotes from this blasphemous publication:

"The American Christ is a Christ of separation and selfishness; we want no part of him."

Of pre-marital sex it said:

"If kids were made aware of alternatives, they wouldn't have to worry about getting into trouble. If there were some way you could stop pregnancy, I don't think there would be anything wrong with sex."

In one issue a review of a movie *The Graduate* contained six large and lurid photographs of sex scenes describing in detail how a boy had his first sexual experience with a married woman.

In 1968 more than 400 students attended a youth convention in Atlanta during the Christmas holidays. Our liberal leaders who sponsored this conference had the young people sing this blasphemous song from a song book published by the National Council of Churches. Here are the words:

It was on a Friday morning that they took me from the cell,  
And I say they had a carpenter to crucify as well.  
You can blame it on to Pilate, You can blame it on the Jews,  
You can blame it on the devil, It's God I accuse.  
You can blame it on to Adam, You can blame it on to Eve,  
You can blame it on the apple, but that I can't believe.

It was God that make the devil, and the woman and the man,  
And there wouldn't be an apple if it wasn't in the plan.  
Now Barrabas was a killer, and they let Barrabas go.  
But you are being crucified for nothing here below.  
But God is up in heaven and he doesn't do a thing,  
With a million angels watching, and they never move a wing.  
To hell with Jehovah, to the Carpenter I said;  
I wish that a carpenter had made this world instead.  
Goodbye and good luck to you, our way will soon divide.  
Remember me in heaven, the man you hung beside.

CHORUS:

It's God they ought to crucify. instead of you and me.  
I said to the carpenter, a-hanging on the tree.

Commenting on this convention three young men from Beaumont, Texas, wrote that they thought the planned purpose of the convention was to blaspheme the name of our Lord and to completely destroy any sense of morality in the youth of our church.

At the 1971 General Assembly our four conservative organizations decided to make an all-out effort to elect three conservatives to the Permanent Nominating Committee-probably the most vital single committee in the church. Our nominees were Dr. C. Darby Fulton who had ably directed our Board of World Missions for many years, Walter Shepard, a former missionary, and Ruth Bell Graham (Billy Graham's wife).

The liberals nominated the layman from Charleston, West Virginia, who had given the church \$50,000 to start paying for abortions, a minister from San Antonio, Texas, who held a liquor party in his room every night, invited our youth delegates and got two of them so drunk that they had to be hospitalized, and a liberal woman from Texas. It was the most radical group ever nominated for this very important committee. All three were elected.

This assembly rejected an overture to withdraw from the National Council of Churches by a vote of 213 to 189. It condemned the Commission on Overseas Evangelism which the Presbyterian Evangelistic Fellowship had set up to provide a vehicle by which churches and individuals who had lost faith in the Board of World Missions could support conservative missionaries. The vote was 270 to 126.

The assembly rejected a motion to order the Board of Christian Education to stop cooperating in publishing *Colloquy* – the blasphemous magazine which was undermining the morality of our young people.

A few weeks after the General Assembly representatives of Concerned Presbyterians, Presbyterian Churchman United, Presbyterian Evangelistic Fellowship and the Presbyterian Journal met in Atlanta to assess the situation. They decided that the time had come to abandon our efforts to change the liberal leadership and to start planning for a new church. The vote was 25 to 1.

A steering committee of three members from each organization was appointed. Rev. Donald B. Patterson was elected chairman; Rev. James Baird, vice chairman; and Rev. Kennedy Smartt, secretary. Dr. Jolan E. Richards resigned his pastorate at First Presbyterian Church, Macon, Georgia to become administrator for the steering committee.

In August 1971 this decision was announced with this statement:

*INTOLERABLE SITUATION*

We have reached the point where the situation in our beloved church has become intolerable to thousands of loyal Presbyterians who love the Lord, and want to serve Him in a Presbyterian church which will be true to His Word. We feel that we can no longer be a part of a denomination in which the Board of Christian Education publishes literature which violates our Confession of Faith and encourages our young people to experiment with sex and drugs; in a denomination in which the Board of World Missions no longer places its primary emphasis on carrying out the Great Commission; in a denomination with seminaries which train ministers who substitute social and political action for the preaching of the

Word; in a denomination where presbyteries violate our constitution by receiving ministers who refuse to affirm the Virgin Birth, the bodily resurrection and other cardinal doctrines, while denying membership to faithful ministers who stand firmly for these doctrines which they vowed to uphold.

Especially do we feel that we can no longer subject our children and grandchildren to the kind of youth leaders that those in control have seen fit to place in these sensitive position-young radicals who seem determined to lead our young people away from their faith in God.

Two years were spent in laying the foundation for our new denomination.

#### *OUR FIRST ASSEMBLY*

During 1973, 260 churches with approximately 40,000 members withdrew from the Presbyterian Church in the United States. Their representatives attended our first General Assembly held at the Briarwood Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, Alabama, and formed what we now know as the Presbyterian Church in America.

On January 1, 1987 we had 924 churches with 160,827 members. We had 99 groups in the process of forming churches. Our church is the most rapidly growing Presbyterian body in our nation.

The church we left was a regional church extending from Maryland and Virginia in the east, to Texas and Oklahoma in the west. Today we are a national church, with churches in almost every state including Hawaii, and in three provinces in Canada. At the present time we have approximately 430 missionaries serving 40 countries. The church we left – with more than 800,000 members – was having difficulty in maintaining 300 missionaries in foreign lands.

God has richly blessed this effort to be true to His Word, faithful to historic Presbyterian doctrine and polity and obedient to the Great Commission.