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Front cover: Local women’s choir sings during the Integration celebration in Luebo, March 18, 1970.

Back cover: School children from Luluabourg with a sign that says “Follow the Light,” March 15, 1970; Bakete men at the Integration celebration in Luebo, March 18, 1970.
Two Hundredth Anniversary
1767 — 1967

BEEKMAN STREET
1767-1856

PIFTH AVENUE
1858-1937

91ST STREET AND PARK AVENUE
1940

The Brick Presbyterian Church
FOUNDED 1767

Program for the two-hundredth anniversary of The Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City. (RG 425, PHS).
William P. Merrill, The Brick Church, and the Fundamentalist-Modernist Conflict

By Bradley J. Longfield

William P. Merrill, pastor of The Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City from 1911 to 1936, played a major role in the fundamentalist-modernist conflict in the Presbyterian Church in the early twentieth century. Through numerous publications, leadership in the national church, and participation in the Laymen’s Foreign Missions Inquiry, he energetically promoted the advance of liberal Christianity against the opposition of militant conservatives such as J. Gresham Machen and Clarence E. Macartney. Merrill’s efforts contributed significantly to the church’s decision to tolerate liberalism in order to preserve the institutional unity of the church.

On Sunday, May 21, 1922, Harry Emerson Fosdick entered the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York and delivered the most famous sermon of his career: “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” Fosdick, a liberal Baptist preaching by special permission in the Presbyterian Church, had become increasingly concerned with conservative Christians criticizing their more liberal counterparts. Liberals, Fosdick insisted, were sincere evangelical Christians who were trying to reconcile the old faith with new knowledge, while fundamentalists were intolerant conservatives who desired to “shut the doors of Christian fellowship” against those who sought to modify doctrines such as the virgin birth of Christ, inerrancy of Scripture, or the substitutionary atonement. Fosdick’s sermon set off a firestorm of criticism and sparked a conflict that would eventually split the church.

William P. Merrill, pastor of the Brick Presbyterian Church in New York, one of the oldest and most prestigious Presbyterian congregations in the nation, played a major role in the controversy. Against militant conservatives such as J. Gresham Machen and Clarence E. Macartney, who vigorously opposed the advance of liberalism in the Presbyterian Church, Merrill persistently advocated for the acceptance of modernist theology in the denomination to benefit the church and the world, through his numerous publications, his participation in the Rockefeller-funded Laymen’s Foreign Missions Inquiry, and his leadership in national church bodies.

Merrill was born in Orange, New Jersey, just after the end of the Civil War. He received his B.A. and A.M. from Rutgers in 1887 and 1890 respectively, and graduated from Union Theological Seminary, New York, in 1890. He attended Union at a time of increasing tension between theological liberals and conservatives in the Presbyterian Church. One Union faculty member, Charles Augustus Briggs, championed more modern methods of biblical interpretation. Briggs, a leading biblical scholar, had been named to the chair of Hebrew and Cognate Languages at Union in 1876 and, in 1880, joined with Archibald A. Hodge of the more conservative Princeton Seminary to co-edit the Presbyterian Review. Over time the journal led to conflict between the two Presbyterian seminaries, as Briggs’s historical-critical approach conflicted with Princeton’s conservative understanding of scripture. Throughout the 1880s, Briggs published articles that criticized the doctrine of biblical inerrancy articulated by the faculty at Princeton, and worked to have the Westminster Confession revised to make it more congruent with modern science. In 1891, the year after Merrill’s graduation, Briggs was moved to the chair of Biblical Studies at Union. He delivered a controversial inaugural address that led to a long heresy trial and, ultimately, his defrocking. As a result, Union Seminary
rescinded its relationship with the Presbyterian Church, and Briggs joined the Episcopal Church.4

In the course of the next twenty years, Union cemented its role as one of the leading liberal seminaries in the nation, and Merrill's theology matured along similar lines. In 1896, while pastor of the Sixth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, Merrill published *Faith Building*, which reflected the liberal emphasis on the benevolence of God, the humanity of Jesus, and concern for ethics, rather than doctrine. Merrill argued in this work that “the Person and Character of Jesus of Nazareth” was the “one fact upon which all true Christian faith rests.” This did not mean necessarily affirming that Jesus was divine, but that he “made a great impression upon his friends” and that his was “the most perfect life that ever had been lived.” Given that, Merrill concluded, “Jesus was either a man whom God taught or he was God himself” and “either of these positions is enough to base a Christian faith upon.” The main truth that Jesus taught, Merrill insisted, was “the Fatherhood of God,” and our main “duty is to do the will of God” as known in the Bible and our conscience. By relying on Jesus as “Teacher and Master,” individuals could find the “principle of true living.”5

Four years later, in his book *Faith and Sight*, written at a time when changes in the Westminster Confession of Faith were being debated by the church, Merrill insisted, “The days when men could adopt a creed like the Westminster Confession of Faith, with an absolute certainty that it was the very truth of God, are gone forever.” But creeds in themselves were not necessarily obsolete. “Creeds are the clothing of faith,” he argued, and he celebrated the evolving accommodation of Christianity to contemporary intellectual trends. “True faith,” he declared, “will gradually assume a shape which will substantially express the belief of the age.”
Indeed, a firm believer in the need for theological accommodation to intellectual and cultural trends, he claimed theology “must change as the science of the time changes, and still more as the nature of man becomes more thoroughly understood.” As such, “a conception of God which is true for one time may be far from adequate for another.”

Contrary to Presbyterian conservatives at Princeton Seminary who rooted biblical authority in the “inerrant original manuscripts,” Merrill argued that the Bible was authoritative because “it is true to the nature of man, meets his highest needs, satisfies his religious instinct.” Theologians needed to reconcile this “subjective theology,” grounded in the “moral and spiritual instincts of man” with “the facts which [the] scientific study of life reveals.” “Subjective theology waits on psychology for new facts,” Merrill claimed, “and it must build on them when they are found.” But inasmuch as “nothing is known to man higher, more perfect, than the human spirit,” a theology that describes God “in terms of the human spirit, is the best possible interpretation.”

Here was the importance of Jesus for Merrill. Since “the best revelation that could be given was an interpretation of God in terms of the best known of human nature,” and since Jesus was “perfect as no other man has been,” then “man is the most perfect representation of God.” “God is unknowable,” Merrill concluded, “unseeable, yet we have a vision of Him which is true as the motive of a religious and moral experience, in the Perfect Man who reveals Him.”

The Victorian poets Alfred Lord Tennyson and Robert Browning, better than any other contemporaries, Merrill argued, linked subjective theology and objective reality, because “their keynote is human nature as the interpretation of the divine nature.” So, commenting on a poem of Tennyson, he claimed, “God . . . is seen in our own nature; our love, our personality, is the highest image of His Infinite Nature.”

Merrill’s publications, pastoral success, church leadership, and, no doubt, his love of poetry, brought him to the attention of Rev. Henry Van Dyke, who had been pastor of Brick Church from 1883 to 1900, before assuming a faculty position in English Literature at Princeton University. When a pastoral vacancy unexpectedly occurred at Brick Church in 1910, Van Dyke agreed to find a suitable leader for the church. After hearing Merrill preach in Chicago, Van Dyke nominated him for election by the congregation. He was installed as pastor Oct. 8, 1911, and held forth from the pulpit for 25 years, until 1936.

New York was, at the time, on the forefront of contemporary developments. Evidence of the seemingly limitless possibilities of science and engineering were all around; the city was at the center of the economic revolution that was transforming America and new ideas, art, and life-styles flourished. Brick Church’s prestigious membership included many of the most prominent national leaders of these economic, intellectual, and...
cultural developments. Merrill, at home in this environment, would energetically articulate and defend his liberal theological positions in books, articles, and church courts in the coming decades.

In the wake of World War I, Merrill published the book *Christian Internationalism*, a ringing endorsement of a League of Nations rooted in the conviction that “the Bible is a democratic book, and the Gospel is of one fabric with democracy.” A vigorous proponent of the social gospel and a convinced pacifist, Merrill argued that, “Christianity is a power manifested in human society for its redemption and transformation.” “The Christian ‘way,’” he claimed, “is not most of all a way to heaven, but far more a way to fair and happy living for all men here.” Most important, he argued, “is… the dominance of international life and relations by Christian principles and the Christian spirit.” “Christ started a society, a brotherhood,” he projected confidently, “destined to unite the world.”

The unity Merrill looked for in the world was certainly not to come in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (PCUSA) any time soon. In the wake of Fosdick’s sermon, the Presbytery of Philadelphia requested that the PCUSA General Assembly require the Presbytery of New York to bring the preaching of First Presbyterian Church, New York, into conformity with the Westminster Confession of Faith. A young, conservative professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, J. Gresham Machen, watched these developments closely; in 1923, spurred in part by Fosdick’s sermon, Machen published *Christianity and Liberalism*, in which he argued that “despite the liberal use of traditional phraseology modern liberalism not only is a different religion from Christianity but belongs in a totally different class of religions.” As far as Machen was concerned, “the liberal attempt at reconciling Christianity with modern science” had resulted in it relinquishing “everything distinctive of Christianity.”

When the General Assembly gathered in May 1923 in Indianapolis, the first item of business was election of a moderator. William Jennings Bryan, three-time presidential candidate and anti-evolution crusader, stood as a candidate but lost to Charles Wishart, president of the College of Wooster, which taught evolutionary theory. Bryan’s narrow loss signaled a moderate stance for the assembly on evolution. In regard to Fosdick, however, the assembly leaned to the right. It reaffirmed the five fundamentals of the faith articulated by the PCUSA General Assemblies of 1910 and 1916 (the inerrancy of scripture and the virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, miracle-working power, and bodily resurrection of Christ), and required the Presbytery of New York to “take such action… as will require the preaching and teaching in the First Presbyterian Church of New York City to conform to the system of doctrines taught in the Confession of Faith.”

Liberals were in no mood to take such directives lying down. The next day, Merrill, a commissioner to the assembly, presented a protest signed by eighty-five commissioners which claimed, “the action sought to impose doctrinal tests other than or in addition to those embodied in the Constitution.” Merrill told the *New York Times* that the assembly “said what was not true, did what was not fair and attempted to put a yoke on our necks which I, for one, will never bear.” Henry Van Dyke returned to Brick Church and declared that “of the five points, one was non-essential [the Virgin Birth], and three were unscriptural...
In mid-June, thirty-three clergy met in Syracuse, New York, to develop a concerted response to the General Assembly. Over the next six months, a committee, including Merrill, developed “An Affirmation Designed to Safeguard the Unity and Liberty of the Presbyterian Church,” usually called the Auburn Affirmation, because its main drafter, Robert Hastings Nichols, was on the faculty at Auburn Theological Seminary. Brick Church was often the site of meetings of the conference committee that composed the document.

The affirmation stated that its signatories were evangelical Christians who affirmed the system of doctrine in the Westminster Confession, but insisted that the doctrinal declaration of the 1923 assembly affirming the five fundamentals was unconstitutional because doctrine could be “declared only by concurrent action of the General Assembly and the presbyteries.” The theological center of the declaration argued that the endorsement of the fundamentals attempts to commit our church to certain theories concerning the inspiration of the Bible, and the Incarnation, the Atonement, the Resurrection, and the Continuing Life and Supernatural Power of our Lord Jesus Christ. . . . Some of us regard the particular theories contained in the deliverance of the General Assembly of 1923 as satisfactory explanations of these facts and doctrines. But we are united in believing that these are not the only theories allowed by the Scriptures and our standards as explanations of these facts and doctrines of our religion, and that all who hold to these facts and doctrines, whatever theories they may use to employ them, are worthy of all confidence and fellowship.

The language of the affirmation echoed significant parts of Merrill’s published theology. In 1920, he had, for example, drawn a distinction between “opinions” and “facts” recorded in the Apostles’ Creed. He wrote that what is important are “the great underlying realities which these ancient words struggle to set forth,” rather than the creed’s “opinions about past facts and future expectations.” “It can never be an essential part of the faith by which a man, or a church, lives,” Merrill insisted, “that certain things did or did not happen in the past.”

As such, the historical accuracy or reliability of the Bible was not essential for Merrill. “Think what you may [about the accounts of miracles in the Gospel] . . . as a part of actual history,” he wrote; “at least they stand here on the pages of the Gospel as striking parables for you and me setting forth the power of what God can do.” Similarly, the creed’s affirmation of the future “resurrection of the body,” Merrill insisted, was “an outgrown fancy, untrue for most thinking men and women . . . . That this body of ours shall rise and live we can neither believe nor desire. . . . We should all see this at least, that the most serious mistake is that of those who say Christ’s resurrection, or ours, cannot be real unless it is physical.” Rather, what the writers of the creed meant when they affirmed the resurrection of the body was that they affirmed “the continuity of personal existence,” and this “conviction is a true and precious one.” To deny the “resurrection of the body” was simply, in the words of the Auburn Affirmation, to deny one “theory,” not the meaning of the “fact” or “doctrine.”

As the composition of the Auburn Affirmation indicated, liberals had decided to take the fight to the conservatives. Merrill, because of his prominence as a pastor and author, came in for significant criticism from conservatives. In June of 1923, the New York Presbytery, the most liberal presbytery in the nation, licensed two students from Union, Henry P. Van Dusen and Cedric Lehman, who refused to affirm the Virgin Birth of Christ. In January 1924, the drafters of the Auburn Affirmation released the document and, in February, the New York Presbytery adopted a report that basically exonerated Fosdick and suggested no change in his relationship to the PCUSA.

Adding fuel to the fire, in February 1924 Merrill published an article in The World’s Work in which he laid out several arguments. First, he claimed that “the great facts and doctrines of Christianity are striking, glorious, perfect forthsettings of universal truths.” Second, he stated that “the perfect divinity of Jesus . . . is truly the supreme manifestation of the divine that is in all men.” He further argued that “the atonement on Calvary is the supreme expression of the cosmic law that life advances through the sacrifice of the fittest and best,” and that “the resurrection of Christ is the seal on the unquenchable hope of immortality in the human heart.” Ultimately, he insisted, “the more simple and
common and universal and indubitable anything is, the more divine it is’ but fundamentalism, as a “religion of authority” rather than a “religion of the spirit,” was seeking to “hold Protestantism to a… Roman Catholic pattern of thought.”

J. Gresham Machen, whom Merrill would take on directly in his 1925 book Liberal Christianity, claimed that Merrill’s article was clear and compelling evidence that “the Modernism of which he [Merrill] is a prominent advocate is the diametrical opposite of Christianity at almost every conceivable point.” The editor of The Presbyterian likewise responded vigorously, charging Merrill with rejecting “the authority of the Bible” and adopting “a position close to cultured paganism”—charges that Merrill denied. But even some of Merrill’s allies questioned his wisdom in publishing this piece.

Conservatives responded to the liberal offensive, bringing the Auburn Affirmation and the exoneration of Fosdick to the attention of the 1924 General Assembly. Fundamentalist Clarence Macartney was elected as moderator but, despite a conservative majority, the assembly chose not to address the Auburn Affirmation. Merrill’s article in The World’s Work had not gone unnoticed by the commissioners, and Merrill, who had long served on the Board of Foreign Missions of the PCUSA, removed himself from consideration for reelection after facing stiff opposition in committee. On the matter of Fosdick, the body addressed the issue in terms of polity rather than theology: they instructed the Presbytery of New York to invite Fosdick to become a member of the Presbyterian Church if he desired to continue to preach at First Presbyterian Church, New York.

Merrill, though slighted by removal from the Board of Foreign Missions, was pleased by the outcome of the Fosdick case. He told the New York Times, “The decision reached seems to me to be one with which all should be reasonably satisfied, and it is particularly pleasing to friends of Dr. Fosdick that the invitation to enter the Presbyterian ministry is so cordial and courteous.” Though liberals were delighted at this outcome, Fosdick refused to enter the Presbyterian Church, claiming that he would feel like he were “lying like a rogue” to assent to the Westminster Confession.

Given the storm swirling around Fosdick only blocks away from Brick Church, the attacks Merrill had endured at the hands of conservatives, and Merrill’s own theological convictions, he decided
to expand the liberal counter-attack to other fronts. Merrill delivered the Stephen Greene Lectures at Newton Theological Institution in Massachusetts, in which he responded directly to Machen, and published the lectures as *Liberal Christianity* in 1925. Pulling no punches, Merrill insisted that Machen’s claims in *Christianity and Liberalism* could be “saved from condemnation as false witness only by a plea of crass ignorance. Either [Machen]… does not know the facts about the modern liberal movement in the Church, or he mistates the facts he knows.”

Liberal Christianity was, Merrill argued, concerned primarily with spiritual experience and ethics. He admitted that “there must be…an elasticity and even a vagueness about the faith of a liberal Christian,” but that was because “the liberal Christian cares infinitely more for spirit than for the forms spirit assumes, for experience than for the creeds in which they express themselves.” Echoing claims he had made twenty-five years earlier, he argued that the “one sure, fixed doctrine about God,” was that God is “Our Father,” the Bible was “the revelation of Personality,” and “Christianity, the religion of personality,” found “its climax in Jesus Christ,” “the supreme and ideal man.”

Liberal Christianity, Merrill claimed, did not necessarily abide by many traditional understandings of Christian teaching. For example, sin was not primarily a violation of God’s law, but “an offense against…the love and goodness of the Father”; it was “a personal relationship broken.” Likewise, Merrill rejected the doctrine of the substitutionary atonement; the crucifixion was not an act “to placate God,” but rather a revelation of “how far He [God] will go to deal with sin and suffering.” The cross, Merrill contended, was “a perfect symbol” of God’s “present living grace.” Salvation, though “hard to define accurately,” was perhaps best conceived as enjoying “being holy and loving.” It was “fellowship with God.”

Contrary to fundamentalists, Merrill argued that the Bible was authoritative “not because it can be shown to have no flaw in it, but because so evidently God is in it,” and it guided “men… to holy, loving, godly living.” As such, the liberal Christian, Merrill contended, does not worry about the accuracy of the biblical accounts of, for example, the resurrection of Jesus, but rather is assured of Christ’s resurrection “by the glory of Christ’s personality.” Likewise, rather than worrying about the details of creeds and doctrines, liberals focused on ethics, on living as Jesus would live.

Ultimately, the “real Gospel” entailed “walking in the way of Jesus.”

In opposition to the claims of conservatives like Machen, “liberals” were, Merrill insisted, “at heart evangelical, and that which at bottom they…[held] in common with other true evangelicals… [was] far more significant than that which…[divided] them.” “Liberal Christianity…[was] that form of Christianity which…[was] adapting itself to modern thought, and this,” he boldly concluded, made liberalism “the religious hope of the world.”

Despite Merrill’s best efforts, not everyone in the Presbyterian Church was convinced of the global benefits of liberalism, and conservatives refused to back down. The action of New York Presbytery to license two students who could not affirm the Virgin Birth of Christ came before the assembly in 1925. The assembly determined that the two, given such theological commitments, should not have been licensed, and returned the matter to the presbytery for correction. The commissioners of the New York Presbytery were prepared for such a decision. In response, Henry Sloane Coffin, pastor of Madison
ACTION OF
THE BOARD OF FOREIGN MISSIONS
OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN THE USA
REGARDING THE
REPORT OF THE APPRAISAL COMMISSION
OF THE
LAYMEN’S FOREIGN MISSIONS INQUIRY

Pamphlet issued in November 1932 by the Board of
Foreign Missions to clarify its position on topics raised
by the Laymen’s Foreign Missions Inquiry.

Avenue Presbyterian Church and prominent
Presbyterian liberal, read a statement claiming that
the commissioners of the Presbytery of New York
(which included Merrill) “on behalf of the said
Presbytery, respectfully declare that the Presbytery of
New York will stand firmly upon the constitution of
the Church… which forbids the Assembly to change
or add to the conditions for entrance… in the holy
ministry, without submitting such amendment to the
Presbyteries for concurrent action.”

With the threat of schism in the air,
the moderator, Charles Erdman, moved the
appointment of a commission to study the “unrest”
in the church and bring a report to the following
assembly, “to the end that the purity, peace, unity,
and progress of the Church may be assured.”

While this Commission of 1925 sought a way to keep the
church from splitting, Merrill had to avoid yet more
incoming fire from conservatives. In a March 1926
issue of The Presbyterian, the editor took Merrill
to task for a sermon Merrill had published in The
Christian Work; the editor claimed that Merrill’s life
“had been marked with an increasing departure
from the Scriptural and Evangelical faith.”

Merrill, incensed by this attack, took the matter
to the New York Presbytery in April claiming that
“these statements… are so grave in their accusation,
and so slanderous in their unfounded imputations,
that I think it my duty, as a member of this Presbytery,
to put the facts before you.” Merrill argued that
he believed in the resurrection and the deity of
Christ, and asked that his statement be referred to the
Special Commission of 1925. In response, the editor
of The Presbyterian quoted more of Merrill’s works
that he found questionable and encouraged Merrill,
therefrom, not to “belittle, attack, or deny the
essentials as stated in the Word of God.”

At the 1926 General Assembly, the Special
Commission of 1925 presented a unanimous report
that claimed there was no radically liberal party in
the church. The report affirmed “the evangelical
unity of our Church at large,” and demanded “all
slander and misrepresentation must be brought to
an end.”

Most significantly, the commission agreed
with the claim of the Auburn Affirmation that only
the General Assembly acting in concert with the
presbyteries could change the constitution. With the
adoption of this report, and the final report in 1927,
the five fundamentals were declared non-binding
and tolerance for liberals was assured.

While the adoption of these reports brought
peace, for a while, to the New York Presbytery,
they did not end the conflict in the PCUSA or
the role of William Merrill and the Brick Church
in the controversy. In 1930, John D. Rockefeller
Jr. initiated the “Laymen’s Foreign Missions
Inquiry” with the “tentative blessing” of seven
denominations, including the PCUSA. The
inquiry, which sought to analyze the state of world
missions and prescribe paths for the future, was
largely conducted by a Commission of Appraisal on
which Merrill sat by invitation, and resulted in the
The report, authored by the commission and reflecting
the modernist convictions of its members,
precipitated the final chapter of the fundamentalist-
modernist conflict in the Presbyterian Church.
The theological section of the report was written by Chairman William Ernest Hocking, a Harvard philosopher and liberal Congregationalist. As historian William Hutchison has claimed, “the integrating vision” of the report “was that of Christianity’s active participation in an emerging world religion.” The study argued that “Christianity’s uniqueness…lay not in any particular historical or doctrinal claims but rather in its selection of truths available in all religions, and in the simplicity of its central teachings.” In this, of course, the report echoed Merrill’s claim from 1924 that “the great facts and doctrines of Christianity are striking, glorious, perfect forthsettings of universal truths.”

The syncretistic aspects of the report, while applauded by liberals, set off a wave of criticism by conservatives. In response, the Board of Foreign Missions of the PCUSA sought to distance itself from the more radical claims of the report, particularly its refusal to insist on the uniqueness of the Christian faith. The board, for example, quickly issued a statement that reaffirmed “the evangelical basis of the missionary enterprise” and “Jesus Christ as the only Lord and Saviour.” But the conflict would not die down, and among those at center stage were missionary Pearl Buck and the only Presbyterian member of the Commission on Appraisal, William Merrill.

Shortly after the publication of the report, Pearl Buck, a Presbyterian missionary to China and Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist, published a review of the report in Christian Century in which she praised the work as “a unique book, a great book.” In a thinly veiled critique of inerrantist conservatives, she claimed, “I think it is the only book I have ever read which seems to me literally true in its every observation and right in its every conclusion.” At about the same time, she delivered a speech titled “Is There a Case for Foreign Missions?” to Presbyterian women and members of the Board of Foreign Missions at the Astor Hotel in New York City. In the speech, Buck denied the doctrine of original sin and questioned the divinity of Christ and significance of his historical reality. Additionally, she discounted the need for personal conversion or planting “self-supporting churches.” Nonetheless, missions should continue, she allowed, even if only to show Christ as “the essence of men’s dreams of simplest and most beautiful goodness.” At the end of the speech, the audience sat in stunned disbelief, and before applause began, her publisher was whisking her off the stage. She knew, she later reflected, “I had done something devastating.”

In response to Re-Thinking Missions, Robert Speer, senior secretary of the Board of Foreign Missions, applauded some of the practical recommendations of the report, but condemned the theological underpinnings of the work as “the old Protestant liberalism which has already been superseded in Europe by a deep evangelical wave.” Given that Merrill was an author of the report, that he had served on the Board of Foreign Missions, and that his own theological position was largely reflected in the report, such an evaluation must have stung. Buck, not wanting to cause more damage than she had done, resigned as a missionary in May 1933 and returned to China.

The 1933 General Assembly repudiated all aspects of Re-Thinking Missions that conflicted with the confessional standards of the church, and affirmed “that while certain truths may be found in other religions, complete and final truth is to be
found in Jesus Christ alone through the religion of which he is the center.” In June, in the wake of this conflict so closely connected with their pastor, the session of Brick Church weighed in on the national controversy for the first time since the fundamentalist-modernist conflict began. In restrained language, they defended their pastor and Pearl Buck:

The Session of the Brick Presbyterian Church records its deep concern over certain recent developments in discussion concerning our foreign missions.

We particularly deplore the attack upon one of the best-known Presbyterian missionaries, Mrs. Pearl S. Buck, leading to her resignation, lest by the prolongation of an unpleasant theological controversy she impair her own Christian missionary work and that of others.

We are truly sorry that the official connection of one who has been such a worthy and able messenger of Christianity in its broadest aspect as distinct from a narrower denominational doctrine should be severed….

We deplore the action of an insistent minority in the Church which considers its view of orthodox Presbyterianism to be of greater importance in the evangelization of the world than the Gospel which our Lord taught and commanded should be preached in all the world to every creature.

While the session felt compelled to adopt a statement and communicate the same to Pearl Buck, it chose not to make the statement public, fearing “such publicity might serve to revive the controversy, and so harm rather than help the cause the Session [had]…at heart.”

The session’s fear of throwing gas on the fire was well founded for Machen, unsatisfied with the response of the General Assembly, formed an Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions. The Independent Board was declared unconstitutional by the 1934 PCUSA General Assembly, which also ordered Presbyterians connected with it to disassociate or suffer church discipline. Despite the pleading of his friends, Machen would not dissolve the Independent Board and, in 1936, was defrocked by the assembly. In response, Machen led in the founding of a new church, now the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, effectively bringing the fundamentalist-modernist conflict in the PCUSA to a close.

Only two years later, William Merrill retired from his position as pastor of the Brick Church, when it merged with the Park Avenue Church and moved uptown to the corner of Park Avenue and 91st Street. By the 1940s, many liberals, chastened by the Great Depression, the rise of fascism in Europe, and the advent of World War II, moderated their high view of humanity and emphasis on the immanence of God, stressing instead humanity’s sinfulness and God’s transcendence. Merrill did not make such a turn. A longtime pacifist who had served as the first president of the Church Peace Union founded by Andrew Carnegie in 1914, Merrill took particular offense at the description of liberalism given by Arthur Cochrane in his 1940 book The Church and the War. As war raged in Europe, Cochrane, a Canadian Presbyterian and one of Swiss theologian Karl Barth’s major interpreters in North America, condemned pacifism and theological liberalism, writing:

Suffice it to say that pacifism is the logical outcome of modern Protestant theology which conceives revelation in terms of the discovery by man himself of impersonal, timeless and general ethical principles by means of reason and experience. It is also based upon an optimistic and unscriptural theory of man which presumes that man is potentially good and can therefore know and obey the truth.

Merrill, in a review of the work, condemned Cochrane’s description of theological liberalism as “nothing less than a calumnious misrepresentation” and found Cochrane’s efforts to offer a scripturally grounded justification for Canada’s war against Hitler’s regime the result of “a disorderly mind” that led to “grave and amazing misstatements.” Against Cochrane’s neo-orthodox plea for opposition to National Socialism, Merrill concluded, “What might have been a strong and convincing defense of the right of Christians to support the governments now waging war against Nazi Germany is vitiated by the fanatical superorthodoxy of the author.”

Having combated the “fanatical superorthodoxy” of fundamentalists for the better part of two decades, Merrill was not about to give way to adherents of neo-orthodoxy who criticized liberals for their accommodation to the culture and their
optimistic view of humanity. While tensions between liberals and conservatives of various stripes in the Presbyterian Church would continue to affect the church in the course of the twentieth century, war was on the horizon for the United States. With the entrance of the nation into World War II, the battles of the fundamentalist-modernist conflict began to recede into history. 

For Further Reading


Notes

1 On Fosdick and the impact of this sermon see Bradley Longfield, The Presbyterian Controversy: Fundamentalists, Modernists, and Moderates (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 9-11. An earlier version of this paper was delivered at The Brick Church, New York, as part of their 250th Anniversary, 12 March 2017. I thank members of the church for their questions and comments.


3 Longfield, Presbyterian Controversy, 22.


7 Merrill, Faith and Sight, 52, 51, 54-55, 73, 107, 104. Likewise, he claims in Footings for Faith, “Your best thought of God will be what you know of man” (37).

8 Merrill, Faith and Sight, 113-114, 117. Merrill echoed these sentiments in Footings for Faith where he claimed that by “the divinity of Christ… we mean… that we find God in Jesus as we find him nowhere else” (72-73).

9 Merrill, Faith and Sight, 128, 129, 158. Merrill also quoted Tennyson repeatedly in Footings for Faith. See e.g. 26, 32, 47, 52.


11 Longfield, Presbyterian Controversy, 80; Turner, Brick Church, 1:125-147.

12 William P. Merrill, Christian Internationalism (New York: Macmillan, 1919), 73, 104-109, 126-130, 8, 11, 42. See also Freedom of the Preacher, 121.

13 Longfield, Presbyterian Controversy, 11.


15 Longfield, Presbyterian Controversy, 54, 72-75; quote on 74.


17 Quoted in Quirk, “Auburn Affirmation,” 84.

18 Quirk, “Auburn Affirmation,” 84.

19 Quirk, “Auburn Affirmation,” 89; Longfield, Presbyterian Controversy, 77-78.


21 Quoted in Longfield, Presbyterian Controversy, 78.

22 Quoted in Longfield, Presbyterian Controversy, 78-79.

23 William Merrill, The Common Creed of Christians (New
24 Merrill, Common Creed, 83, 152–155.
26 Longfield, Presbyterian Controversy, 79, 100.
30 Longfield, Presbyterian Controversy, 125–126, 104, 125.
32 Longfield, Presbyterian Controversy, 126.
34 Quoted in Longfield, Presbyterian Controversy, 126.
36 Merrill, Liberal Christianity, 16, 19–20, 34, 39, 43, 44, 48.
37 Merrill, Liberal Christianity, 34, 54, 100, 98, 52, 53, 55–56, 101. See also Footings for Faith, 121–123, 133–141.
38 Merrill, Liberal Christianity, 47, 88, 57, 58–59, 60, 61–62.
39 Merrill, Liberal Christianity, 140, 152.
40 Longfield, Presbyterian Controversy, 151; Quoted in Longfield, Presbyterian Controversy, 126, 151, 152; Minutes of the General Assembly, 1925, 13.
41 Quoted in Longfield, Presbyterian Controversy, 152.
42 “Dr. Merrill on the Kingdom of God,” The Presbyterian, March 25, 1926, 7.
43 “Dr. Merrill’s paper Referred to the Committee of the Whole,” The Presbyterian, April 22, 1926, 4.
44 “Dr. Merrill’s paper Referred to the Committee of the Whole,” The Presbyterian, April 22, 1926, 4–5.
45 Quoted in Longfield, Presbyterian Controversy, 158, 159.
46 Longfield, Presbyterian Controversy, 159–161.
48 William Ernest Hocking, Re-Thinking Missions: A Laymen’s Inquiry After One Hundred Years (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1932), v–xxv; Hutchison, Errand to the World, 158; Turner, Brick Church, 1:140–141.
51 Longfield, Presbyterian Controversy, 200.
52 Merrill, “Protestantism at the Crossroads,” 422. Merrill expressed his concern about conservative opposition to liberal missionaries as early as 1922. See Freedom of the Preacher, 127.
53 Longfield, Presbyterian Controversy, 200; quoted in Longfield, Presbyterian Controversy, 200.
54 Two members of the Board of Foreign Missions, James Speers and Mrs. John Finley, were also members of the Directors of the Laymen’s Foreign Missions Inquiry. See Edwin Rian, The Presbyterian Conflict (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1940), 129, 137.
55 Quoted in Longfield, Presbyterian Controversy, 201. See also Fitzmier and Balmer, “A Poulrice for the Bite of a Cobra,” 109.
57 Quoted in Longfield, Presbyterian Controversy, 201.
58 Longfield, Presbyterians and American Culture, 162; Grant Wacker, “Pearl S. Buck and the Waning of the Missionary Impulse,” Church History 72 (December 2003), 855; Turner, Brick Church, 1:140–141.
60 Session Minutes, The Brick Church, June 12, 1933, 269; Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, PA (hereafter PHS). Quoted with permission of The Brick Church, New York, New York.
61 Session Minutes, The Brick Church, June 12, 1933, 269–270; PHS.
62 Longfield, Presbyterian Controversy, 206, 209–212.