

Mainstream Presbyterians: Putting the Pieces Together Again after the Fundamentalist Controversy

by James H. Moorhead



After the General Assembly of the PCUSA adopted policies designed to end the fundamentalist-modernist controversy in 1926 and 1927, conflict in the denomination gradually subsided. Presbyterianism became a broader church, neither fully liberal nor fully conservative. By the post-World War II era, it was enjoying new signs of vitality.

In 1925, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (PCUSA) took a significant step toward ending controversy within the denomination. For several decades, Presbyterians had been at odds with one another over theological issues. They had argued about whether ministers could espouse the new biblical scholarship then gaining currency in many pulpits and seminaries. As liberal theology grew fashionable, they debated the legitimacy of reformulating or reinterpreting specific doctrines—for example, the atonement or the resurrection. At bottom, the issue confronting the church was the extent to which it would adapt its faith to the spirit of the age. Because Presbyterian ministers were required to affirm the central tenets of the Westminster Confession, these debates turned on what the church understood the “essential and necessary”

doctrines of Westminster to be and the degree of freedom clergy had in interpreting—or departing from—those doctrines. Several times, starting in 1892, the General Assembly tried to limit theological innovation by singling out as essential certain doctrines that had been called into question by liberal theology. Yet despite several notable heresy trials, the conflict was intermittent and far from all-absorbing. In the wake of World War I, however, the struggle intensified as conservatives sought to force liberalism out of Presbyterian pulpits. For a time, it appeared that liberals might indeed be ousted, but events in 1925 changed the dynamics within the denomination. In that year, the moderator of the General Assembly persuaded that body to authorize the appointment of a special commission to examine the causes of unrest in the church.

The commission’s report, adopted by the assemblies of 1926 and 1927, proposed a means for composing differences. Rejecting the claim that there was widespread departure from the historic faith of the denomination, the commission argued, in effect, that the effort of previous assemblies to define in advance essential articles of the confession was unconstitutional. The church’s constitution (that is, the *Book of Order*) lodged the right of determining what was an essential or necessary article in each presbytery as it, on a case-by-case basis, examined ordinands or received ministers. While the General Assembly had power on an appellate basis to review these decisions, it had no constitutional authority to issue general or blanket statements about what was or was not essential in the confession. In effect, the commission proposed theological decentralization as the solution to the controversy.

James H. Moorhead is Professor of American Church History at Princeton Theological Seminary and Senior Editor of *The Journal of Presbyterian History*.



The Special Commission of 1925 meeting in Atlantic City, September 1925. (Atlantic Foto Service)

And what was the result of this decision? In the retrospect of more than eighty years, the Special Commission of 1925 is rightly seen as a major turning point, at which the northern Presbyterians set themselves on course to become a more inclusive church. Yet, as is often the case with so-called turning points, the importance of the event is clearer in retrospect than it was at the time. To examine briefly what happened to the PCUSA in the thirty years after 1925 is the goal of this essay.

The Ebbing of Conflict

The controversy of the 1920s did not come to a full stop when the General Assemblies of 1926 and 1927 adopted the commission's report. In fact, it rumbled on for another decade. One locus of contention was Princeton Theological Seminary. Founded in 1812, the seminary had adhered to a generally conservative position throughout the nineteenth century, and continued to do so in the 1920s. The faculty, however, were divided on matters of ecclesiastical policy. A majority favored an aggressive, polemical defense of conservative Old School Calvinism as it had been defined by earlier Princeton theologians such as Charles Hodge and Benjamin B. Warfield. The minority, personally espousing conservative views, were nevertheless more irenic and willing to exercise a measure of tolerance toward those of liberal persuasion. The controversies between these two factions embittered faculty life, spilled into public view, and thus became something of an embarrassment to both the

seminary and the denomination it served. To investigate the dissensions and to compose differences, the General Assembly of 1926 appointed a committee. In response to its recommendations, the Assembly of 1929 reduced the seminary's two boards of governance (Trustees and Directors) to one Board of Trustees and strengthened the office of president. The clear intent of the reorganization was to create a school more nearly representative of the denomination as a whole, not merely its most conservative element. In protest, four of the Princeton faculty withdrew and, joined by four others, founded the more conservative Westminster Seminary near Philadelphia. Westminster's founders—among whom the most notable was J. Gresham Machen, who had taught at Princeton since 1906—saw themselves as continuing the tradition of the “old” Princeton. Their new school exercised important influence in sectors of the PCUSA., especially in eastern Pennsylvania, at least until the late 1930s.

Controversy occurred on other fronts as well. The publication in 1932 of *Re-thinking Missions: A Laymen's Inquiry after One Hundred Years* triggered considerable debate. The book, written by Congregationalist layman and Harvard professor William E. Hocking, summarized an investigation and report sponsored by the major Protestant denominations. According to the report, the goal of missionary endeavor should be:

To seek with people of other lands a true knowledge and love of God, expressing in life and word what we have learned through Jesus Christ, and endeavoring to give effect to his spirit in the life of the world.¹

Yet the report also averred that giving effect to the spirit of Jesus Christ did not mean supplanting other faiths. Pearl S. Buck, technically a missionary of the PCUSA at the time and newly famous as the author of the best-selling *The Good Earth*, wrote several articles strongly endorsing the Hocking report. In response to the brouhaha that the report and Buck's articles generated, Robert E. Speer, executive secretary of the PCUSA Board of Foreign Missions, expressed appreciation for many of the specific recommendations of the *Laymen's Inquiry* and agreed that Christian missionaries should indeed approach other peoples in respect and love. However, Speer stoutly affirmed what he called

“the finality of Jesus Christ” and insisted that the ultimate aim of the missionary endeavor was to bring all men and women to the Christian faith. J. Gresham Machen and other ultraconservatives felt this response was inadequate and attacked the board for its failure to safeguard orthodoxy. In 1933, he and others created the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions. The following year, the General Assembly concluded that the Independent Board represented an unconstitutional effort to undermine the denomination’s duly authorized missionary work, demanded that it cease working within the Presbyterian Church, and ruled that all Presbyterian ministers and laymen sever their ties with it. When Machen refused to do so, he was tried by his presbytery and suspended from the ministry. In June 1936, Machen and a group of those in sympathy with him founded the Presbyterian Church of America, soon to be renamed the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. In the months that followed, others joined the secession; but at the end of the day, the schism proved to be far smaller than its advocates hoped or its opponents feared. Somewhat under one percent of the PCUSA joined the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Thus, eleven years after the appointment of the Special Commission of 1925, the conflict was largely over. The recommendations of the commission had provided the framework within which the church could learn to live with its differences, but it took at least a decade for the denomination to figure out how to do so.

Presbyterianism as Broad Church

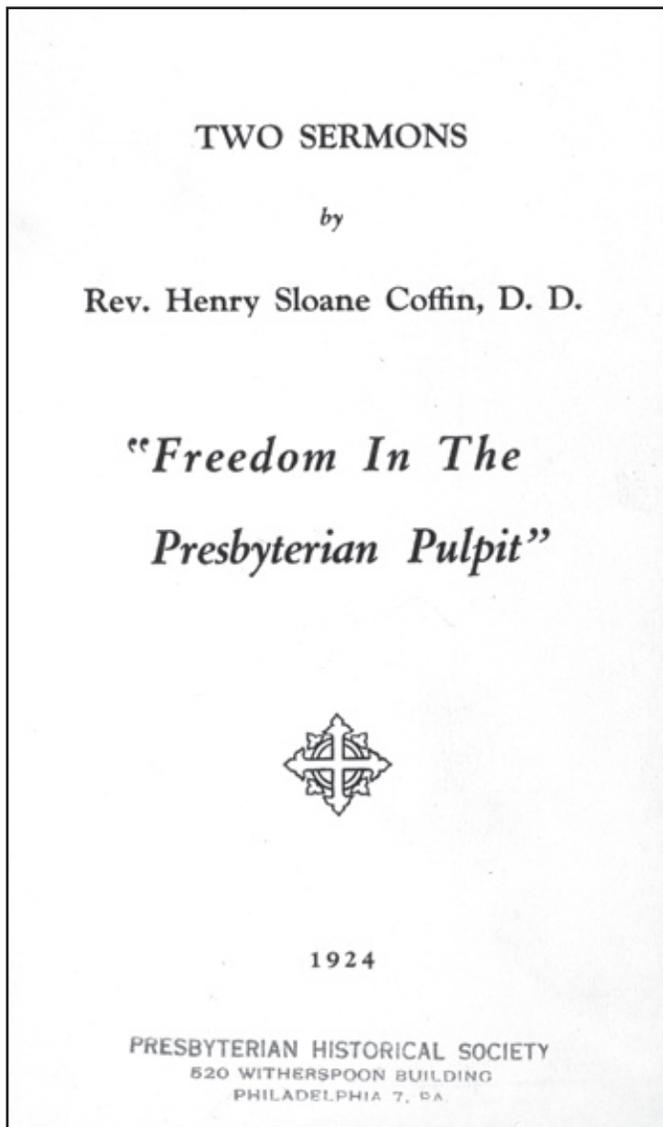
As the ecclesiastical strife subsided, what was the result for Presbyterians? One simple answer would be that the modernists won—and the PCUSA became a liberal church, or at least started to move in that direction. This answer has a measure of truth in it, for the adoption of the recommendations of the Special Commission of 1925 did allow a greater theological latitude within the denomination. Yet there was no unequivocal liberal triumph. What William R. Hutchison has written of what he calls the Protestant establishment—others prefer terms such as mainline or mainstream Protestantism—can be applied to Presbyterians in particular. Mainline Protestantism should, he notes, “in fact be understood as a ‘broad church’ that held together, and exercised whatever cultural authority it did enjoy, precisely because it retained

the adherence, at all levels, of many besides liberals.”² The PCUSA was a broad church, not a liberal church.

This fact is illustrated by the continuing presence of strongly conservative voices in its midst. The numerical smallness of the secession into the Orthodox Presbyterian Church underscores an important point sometimes forgotten: most theological conservatives did not follow Machen out of the denomination. They stayed in the PCUSA, where they sometimes grumbled about church policies or often simply went about the business of pursuing their own ministries. Clarence Macartney provides a case in point. One of the leading proponents of Presbyterian fundamentalism, he led the forces pressing for the ouster of the liberal Baptist Harry Emerson Fosdick from a Presbyterian pulpit in New York City in 1922, was elected moderator of the General Assembly as the ultraconservatives’ candidate in 1924, opposed the reorganization of Princeton Seminary, and became a trustee of Westminster Seminary. Yet when push came to shove, Macartney was not prepared to split the church. He resigned from the board of Westminster Seminary when it became too closely associated with the Independent Board of Foreign Mission, and he refused to join those who formed the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. From 1936 until he retired in 1953, Macartney had a highly successful ministry at First Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh.

On the other side of the theological spectrum, the ministry of a man such as Henry Sloane Coffin was now able to flourish less constrained by controversy. Trained in both liberal theology and biblical criticism, Coffin styled himself an “evangelical liberal.” In the 1920s—first as pastor of the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City and then as president of Union Seminary—Coffin was at the center of maneuvers to assure that Presbyterian liberals might preach their convictions without fear of being tried for heresy or expelled from the ministry. After the adoption of theological decentralization in 1926 and 1927, Coffin and others of his persuasion no longer worried about falling victim to ecclesiastical discipline. It was a mark of the increasing acceptability of the views of people such as Coffin that he was elected moderator of the General Assembly in 1943.

The ability of the church to include people of a variety of theological views had much to do with the triumph of what William J. Weston has called denominational loyalism. The loyalists—sometimes conservative in their theology, on occasion liberal,



"Freedom in the Presbyterian Pulpit," two sermons by Henry Sloane Coffin (New York: Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, 1924).

or more often centrists—tended to view the ties binding the denomination as more than theological in a purely intellectual sense. For them, loyalty to Presbyterianism meant loyalty to a community—its congregations, its schools, its boards, its mission programs, its ethos or way of life. That loyalty, at least to some degree, transcended questions of agreement or disagreement on points of doctrine. The report of the Special Commission of 1925 captured this position well:

The principle of toleration when rightly conceived and frankly and fairly applied is as truly a part of our constitution as are any of the doctrines stated in that instrument....

Toleration as a principle applicable within the Presbyterian Church refers to an attitude and a practice according to which the status of a minister or other ordained officer, is acknowledged and fellowship is extended to him, even though he may hold some views that are individual on points not regarded as essential to the system of faith which the Church professes. Presbyterianism is a great body of belief, but it is more than a belief; it is also a tradition, a controlling sentiment. The ties which bind us to it are not of the mind only; they are ties of the heart as well. There are people who, despite variant opinions, can never be at home in any other communion. They were born into the Presbyterian Church. They love its name, its order and its great distinctive teachings. In its fellowship they have a precious inheritance from their forebears. Their hearts bow at its altars and cherish a just pride in its noble history. Attitudes and sentiments like these are treasures which should not be undervalued hastily nor cast aside lightly.³

This was the charter of a broad church, not a liberal or a fundamentalist church; and it was this conception of Presbyterianism that increasingly won out in the several decades after 1925.

Aiding in the creation of a broader church was a new theological perspective making inroads in the PCUSA in the 1930s. That perspective, called neo-orthodoxy by most American scholars, was neither liberal nor fundamentalist, and it transcended old slogans or shibboleths.

In Europe, it was associated with figures such as Karl Barth and Emil Brunner. In America, its best-known exponents included Reinhold Niebuhr and H. Richard Niebuhr. Shaped in part by the sense of cultural crisis created by World War I and the Great Depression, neo-orthodoxy was not a single theological system, but it did manifest common emphases. It affirmed the centrality of the Bible as God's revelation, while simultaneously remaining receptive to modern biblical criticism. It stressed classic Christian themes such as the transcendence of God, the sinfulness of humanity, and the necessity of redemption in Christ. Yet unlike some fundamentalists who regarded these truths as changeless propositions demanding intellectual assent, the neo-orthodox tended to speak of them as

existential realities requiring encounter and decision. In part because of its complex character, neo-orthodoxy was occasionally denounced by liberals as a sophisticated form of fundamentalism while conservatives frequently rejected it as a stalking horse for liberalism. Yet despite the potshots it took from two directions, neo-orthodoxy offered a new theological perspective that allowed many Presbyterians to move beyond the old party labels. Or as John Mulder and Lee Wyatt have observed:

In the backwash of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, neo-orthodoxy in its various expressions became a welcome mainstream Protestant option. It held that the Bible was authoritative without being inerrant; that theology, confessions, and doctrines were important, but human constructs of a finally ineffable divine mystery; and that culture, though structurally flawed by sin, was potentially gracious and redeemable through the witness of the church to Jesus Christ.⁴

From the late 1930s through the 1950s, many faculty appointments in all of the PCUSA seminaries reflected the theological trend that Mulder and Wyatt have described.

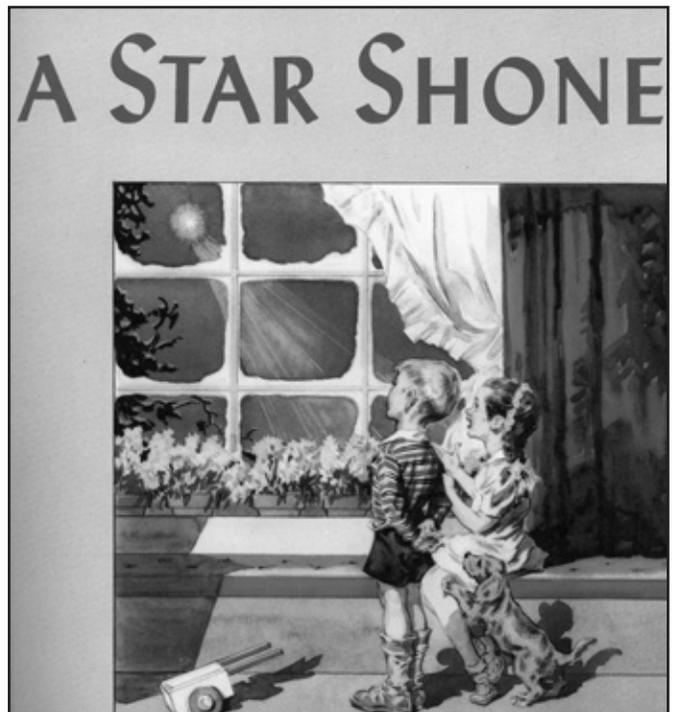
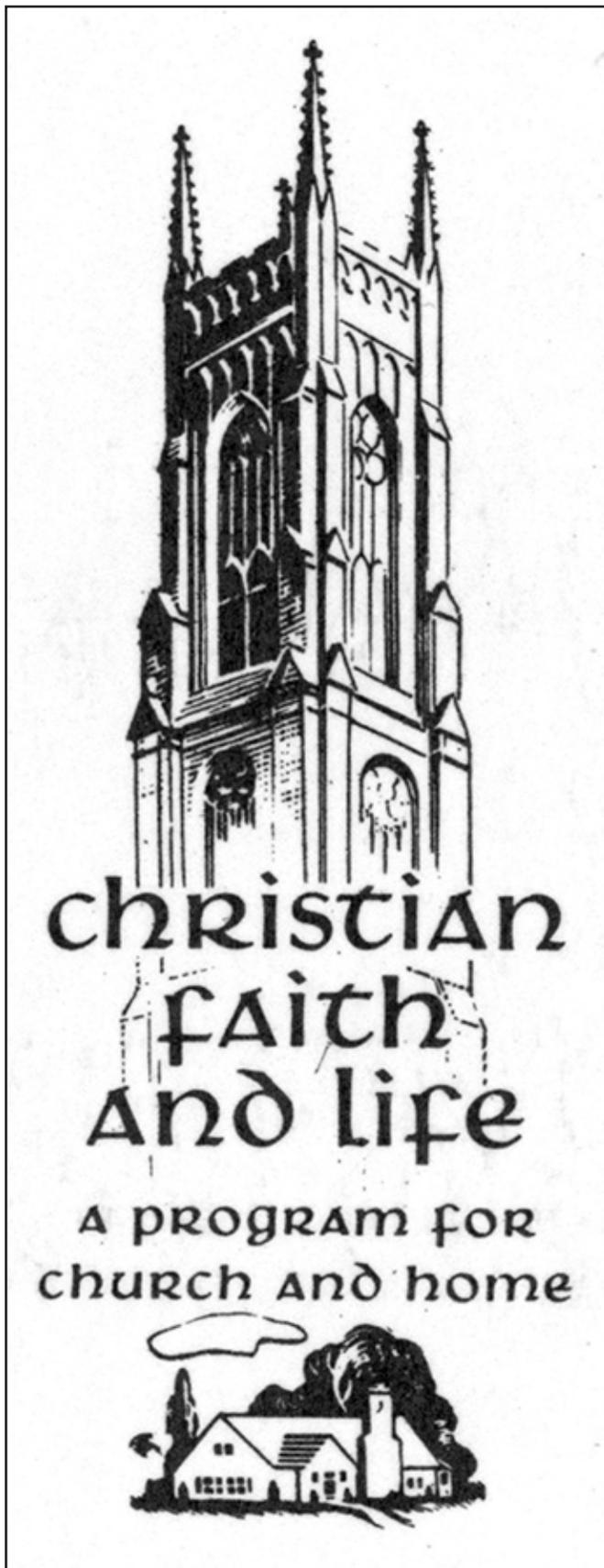
The neo-orthodox consensus that emerged in the seminaries reached even into the Sunday schools. In 1948, the denomination launched the Faith and Life Curriculum. It replaced a 1929 program whose pedagogy had been shaped by progressive theories of education in the tradition of John Dewey. That provenance had made the previous curriculum suspect in conservative quarters, and many Presbyterian churches had refused to use it. The new curriculum focused on several major themes, one for each year of a three-year cycle: Jesus Christ, the Bible, and the Church. These theological motifs resonated with central neo-orthodox concerns and were presented in a way informed by the new theology. Moreover, the curriculum (at least in the materials for adults) treated problems posed by modern biblical scholarship in a typically neo-orthodox fashion. Authors freely acknowledged difficulties raised by the higher criticism, then sought to transcend them by reaffirming the basic message of the Bible. Despite occasional grouching from both the left and right of the church, this approach made the curriculum acceptable to a wide constituency.

The extraordinary success of the Faith and Life Curriculum throughout the 1950s and into the beginning of 1960s was perhaps the most dramatic evidence that Presbyterians had, at least for the moment, transcended old partisan battles and found a new center.

A New Presbyterian Vitality?

The success of Faith and Life was one of multiple signs of new vigor within the denomination by the 1950s. In the same year that the Board of Christian Education inaugurated the new curriculum, *Presbyterian Life* began its career as journalistic voice for the church, its circulation steadily climbing until it peaked at the extraordinary figure of 1.2 million in 1963. During the 1950s, the denomination started more than 700 new churches and added more than 800,000 new members, though some of this growth was due to merger with the much smaller United Presbyterian Church of North America in 1958. The Presbyterian Women's Organization, founded under a different name in 1943, grew into a significant force by the 1950s. In 1956, the denomination approved the ordination of women to the ministry. Presbyterian leaders of the denomination, for the most part, enjoyed prestige and honor among the rank and file. They were, Richard Reifsnnyder has observed, still in the pattern of Robert E. Speer who, while executive of the Board of Foreign Missions, was elected moderator in 1927 without opposition. Speer, Reifsnnyder observes, "was a charismatic spokesperson for a particularly important cause, challenging the church with a vision and prodding it to fulfill its responsibility. In significant ways, his model for leadership continued until the 1970s."⁵ Within the broader culture, Presbyterianism attained greater visibility when one of its popular young ministers, Peter Marshall of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C., was chosen to be chaplain to the U.S. Senate. A few years after Marshall's untimely death in 1949, his widow wrote a best-selling biography that was turned into a box-office success in the movie *A Man Called Peter* (1955). Of course, even greater cachet accrued to the denomination when the previously unchurched Dwight D. Eisenhower was baptized by a Presbyterian minister shortly after his election to the presidency.

The successes of Presbyterianism in the years after World War II were, of course, part of a much



Above: *A Star Shone*, by Robbie Trent, illustrated by Margaret Ayer (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1948), a kindergarten reading book from the Christian Faith and Life curriculum.

Left: The Christian Faith and Life curriculum logo, from Dorothy Westlake Andrews, *God's World and Johnny* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1948).

larger renewal of interest in religion in American life. Sometimes called the “Eisenhower Revival,” this movement was not so much a single entity as it was multiple religious currents sometimes flowing together, sometimes at cross purposes. It included a surge in the construction of new churches as Americans moved to the suburbs to rear a generation that would become known as the “baby boomers,” and as church attendance soared to all-time highs. A deepening interest in religion emerged in the popular media—witness a raft of religious books such as Norman Vincent Peale’s *The Power of Positive Thinking* or Hollywood extravaganzas after the manner of *The Ten Commandments*. The revival entailed a patriotic piety manifested in prayer breakfasts at the White House and in the addition of the phrase “under God” to the Pledge of Allegiance in 1954. Such activities gave expression to the conviction that religion—whether Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish—was vital to the American way of life. Since the United States was

engaged in a Cold War with an officially atheistic Soviet Union, religion became a mark of one's loyalty to the nation. The 1950s also witnessed the emergence of so-called neo-evangelicalism, as sons and daughters of fundamentalism returned more visibly to the public square—but with less stridency than their forebears. The triumphs of Billy Graham's crusades—including the support he generated among many in the Presbyterian Church—offered the most visible tokens of this evangelical resurgence. Also the neo-orthodox theological renaissance begun in the 1930s continued to thrive, attaining in the 1950s something close to unchallenged hegemony in most of the better-known divinity schools and seminaries.

Did these various religious movements add up to a coherent revival? Undoubtedly, many in the pews, Presbyterian and otherwise, were not given to making overly fine distinctions. They appear to have looked at the various forms of religion in the

Eisenhower years and pronounced them good. Yet there were dissenters. Many associated with neo-orthodoxy took a different tack, deriding the revival for its alleged lack of theological content and its inability to utter a prophetic word against the churches or the American way of life. Their critique, as yet only a relatively minor note amidst the celebrations of what A. Roy Eckardt called *The Surge of Piety in America* (1958), prefigured major moral and theological debates in the 1960s. But that story is beyond the temporal scope of this brief essay. From the late 1950s, the PCUSA (the UPCUSA after the 1958 merger) could look back upon the previous three decades of denominational life with at least qualified satisfaction. Whatever its shortcomings in witness or theology, the denomination had learned to live with its differences and had done far better than pessimists would have thought possible when the church seemed on the verge of rending itself in two in 1925. ¶

Notes

¹ William Ernest Hocking, *Rethinking Missions: A Layman's Inquiry After One Hundred Years* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1932), 59.

² William R. Hutchison, ed., *Between the Times: The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America, 1900-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 14.

³ Report of the Special Commission of 1925, as quoted in William J. Weston, *Presbyterian Pluralism: Competition in a Protestant House* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 80–81.

⁴ John M. Mulder and Lee A. Wyatt, "The Predicament of Pluralism: The Study of Theology in Presbyterian

Seminaries Since the 1920s." In Milton J. Coalter, John M. Mulder, and Louis B. Weeks, eds., *The Pluralistic Vision: Presbyterians and Mainstream Protestant Education and Leadership* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 47.

⁵ Richard W. Reifsnnyder, "Transformation in Administrative Leadership in the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., 1920-1983." In Milton J. Coalter, John M. Mulder, and Louis B. Weeks, eds., *The Pluralistic Vision: Presbyterians and Mainstream Protestant Education and Leadership* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 256.

For Further Reading

Those interested in further reading on the subject of this essay should read, in addition to the works cited above, the items listed below.

Loetscher, Lefferts A. *The Broadening Church: A Study of Theological Issues in the Presbyterian Church since 1869*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1954.

Longfield, Bradley J. *The Presbyterian Controversy: Fundamentalists, Modernists, and Moderates*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Moorhead, James H. "Redefining Confessionalism: American Presbyterians in the Twentieth Century." In Milton J. Coalter, John M. Mulder, and Louis B. Weeks, eds., *The Confessional Mosaic: Presbyterians and Twentieth-Century Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 59–83.