

We have seen the Reformed Presbyterian Church almost in infancy in this land. We have seen her cloud of adversity that has tarnished her beauty. We have seen her rent into handfuls, her influence crippled, and her testimony as a witnessing church, lightly spoken of; her right to exist has been disputed.

For all these things let us humble ourselves before the Lord. Our faith is strong that God will yet rise to bless Zion, and her banner will be at the point at which the whole Church will rally at the ushering in of the millennial day.

W. Stormont, 1883
(RPA, 17:4, 106)

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The Reformed Presbyterian Church, General Synod

IN the preceding chapter we have seen the rise of Reformed Presbyterianism in Scotland in the seventeenth century together with its exportation to America in the eighteenth. By the first years of the nineteenth century the Reformed Presbyterian Church was firmly planted in American soil. The reconstitution of the Reformed Presbytery in 1798 under the leadership of James McKinney was followed by an outburst of optimistic energy in the Church. ‘Important additions were soon after made to the ministry, and the Church entered on a career of vigorous labour, crowned by a large measure of progress.’¹ As a result of this energy, the official judicial testimony of the *American* Reformed Presbyterian Church was published in 1807 under the title *Reformation Principles Exhibited*. Two years later—on May 24, 1809—‘All the ministers of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in America, being convened, with ruling Elders delegated from different sessions, did unanimously agree to constitute a Synod.’ The official name was to be the Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in America.²

1. M. Hutchison, *The Reformed Presbyterian Church in Scotland, 1680-1876*, 1893, Appendix VI, ‘Sketch of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in America,’ 405 (cf. 408).

2. *Extracts from the Minutes of the Proceedings of the Reformed Presbytery and the Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church*, 1811, 1. Cf. *Minutes of Reformed Presbytery of America*, from 1798 to 1809, 59, and *Digest of the Acts of the Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America*, from 1809 to 1888, 188, 89. This *Digest* is an indispensable tool for researching the history of the General Synod (New Light) in the 19th century. Cf. R. W. Chesnut, A

It is the purpose of the present chapter to trace the history of this Synod from its enthusiastic beginnings in the early 1800's to its near demise some 150 years later in the 1950's. In covering such a long span of time, we can, of course, only hit the high spots of the history of the General Synod.³

Optimism and Progress

The Reformed Presbyterian Church in America was well aware of her unique circumstances and opportunities. 'God has, in his Providence, presented the human family in this country with a new experiment. The Church, unheeded by the civil powers, is suffered to rise or fall by her own exertions.'⁴ So wrote Alexander McLeod in *Reformation Principles Exhibited*. However, what would be the outcome of these unique circumstances? How would the Church respond to these unique opportunities?

The Reformed Presbyterian Church looked upon the dawn of the nineteenth century with extreme optimism. Indeed, D. M. Carson entitles this chapter in the history of the Church 'The New Optimism.'⁵ This general attitude is well expressed in the words of James McKinney uttered in 1797:

Historical Sketch of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, General Synod, 1945, 6: 'The word "North" seems to have been added later; we now say "North America." ' Chesnut's little *Sketch*, though rare, is very helpful in researching the history of the General Synod. "This historical sketch is based upon the early records of the Church until 1888. After which it is based on the personal knowledge and experience of the author, who was an active pastor for fifty-four years, and has the record of attending General Synod 57 times in 57 years.'

3. The title *General Synod* was added to the name of the RFC when Synod became a delegated body in 1823. With the Disruption of 1833, both sides continued to use the name until 1841 when the Old Lights chose to call themselves simply the *Synod* to distinguish themselves from the New Light *General Synod*, and to lay a claim for genuine continuity with the *Synod* of 1809 as opposed to the *General Synod* of 1823. See N. E. Clark, *A History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church* (Unpublished M.A. Thesis, Butler University), 1966, 56.

4. *Reformation Principles Exhibited by the Reformed Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (RPE)*, 1892, 76.

5. D. M. Carson, *History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in America to 1871*, (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Pennsylvania), 1964, 80-92.

‘The joint triumphs, of enlightened reason, and true religion, must soon become glorious.’ Mankind would soon come to recognize the rights of God, and the millennium would be triumphantly ushered in.⁶ According to McLeod the Fall of the papal antichrist is fast approaching, and the time is near when the Lord will pour forth his Holy Spirit and the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ (Rev. 11:15).⁷

This optimistic spirit was accompanied by the substantial growth of the Church. In 1798 there were two ministers, a few scattered congregations, and some 1000 communicant members. By 1832 there were 36 ministers, 60 organized congregations, and some 5,000 members. The sources of this growth were Covenant children, Reformed Presbyterians from Ireland and Scotland, and converts from other denominations.⁸ These converts were looked upon as those who had become dissatisfied with the use of human compositions in singing God’s praises, the relaxation of church discipline, the prevalence of Hopkinsian and other doctrinal errors, and ‘the carnal, worldly spirit of professors, in the churches which they left.’⁹ At the time of the appearance of the second edition of *Reformation Principles Exhibited* in 1824, it could

6. J. McKinney, *The Rights of God*, 1797 (quoted in Carson, 82).

7. *RPE*, 76. McLeod’s eschatological views—which were very influential in the Reformed Presbyterian Church so as almost to constitute, for a time, what might be called the Reformed Presbyterian eschatology—are amplified in his *Lectures upon the Principal Prophecies of the Revelation* (1814). In this work he maintains that the rise of Antichrist is to be dated from the official beginning of the Papacy in 606 A.D.; and that, according to Daniel and the Apocalypse, Antichrist and his kingdoms are to last 1260 years until 1866 when they will become the kingdom of Christ (Rev. 11:15). At this time all the nations will consistently understand, profess, and support the true religion in all its applications including the area of civil society and polity. McLeod optimistically concludes: ‘It is with high ecstasy that this very period of the world will, a few years hence, be celebrated.’ A. McLeod, *Lectures upon the Principal Prophecies of the Revelation*, 1814, 201, 204. Cf. Carson, 90 f.

8. Carson, 66 ff.

9. *Reformation Principles Exhibited by the Reformed Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Old Light), 1849, 128; henceforth designated *RPEOL*.

be exclaimed: 'Congregations are springing up in the desert, and the wilderness is becoming a fruitful field.'¹⁰

The organization of the Church kept pace with this growth. The number of presbyteries increased. A representative General Synod, to meet every two years, was established in 1823; and by 1832 the General Synod had constituted the Eastern and Western Subordinate Synods for yearly meetings.

The Church was zealous for the education of her ministers, and in 1807 drew up a constitution for a theological seminary. This constitution is interesting, not only because it reveals the Church's conception of the nature of the ministry and of theological education, but also because it reveals her conception of what constitutes proper qualifications for the ministry. These are in order of importance: first, *piety* or practical godliness; second, *good sense* or talents commensurate with the calling; and third, *a good theological education*.¹¹ As fund raisers for the seminary put it: 'The Millennium is not to be introduced by ignorant enthusiasm. There must be an able ministry.'¹²

The Church was also conscious of her responsibility in the areas of discipline, evangelism, and doctrine. The Rev. David Graham was deposed from the ministry and excommunicated from the Church for misconduct in 1812.¹³ In 1822 Covenanters in New York City founded the American Evangelical Tract Society to disseminate tracts in support of the principles of the Reformation.¹⁴ The ministers of the Synod were on the whole prolific authors. For a small number of men they produced a good deal of published material, much

10. *RPE*, 143. Cf. 175 for comment of 1852 edition (New Light) regarding the state of the Church about 1830: 'Ministers, people, and congregations increased in number, and were spread over a vast region of country.'

11. *Digest*, 82. Cf. *Minutes* (1798-1809), 42 (1807), 55 ff (1809).

12. S. B. Wylie and A. McLeod, *An Address to the Members of the Reformed Presbyterian Church for Raising a Fund for the Support of the Theological Seminary*, 1811, 6.

13. For all the proceedings see *Report of the Trial of the Late D. Graham, etc.*, 1813. For the sentence see 127 f.

14. Carson, 86.

of which concerns doctrinal subjects. They were particularly concerned to defend traditional Calvinism against its modern substitutes. For instance, William Gibson wrote *Calvinism vs. Hopkinsianism* (1803), and Gilbert McMaster published a *Defence of Some Fundamental Doctrines of Christianity* (1815)—including the Trinity, the Person of Christ, and the Holy Spirit, the Depravity of Man, and the limited extent of the Atonement. McMaster inquires:

What then? Shall men, in things of religion, be in a state of perpetual hostility? Shall the empire of the *Prince of Peace* never be united? Must each contend for his dogma? The Church of God is indeed lamentably distracted, and in that distraction all parties have a guilty hand. But can the malady be cured by an unprincipled abandonment of fundamental doctrines, merely to obtain a momentary repose from the pains of contest? Such repose would be that of death, to the interests of vital godliness.¹⁵

It was in this spirit that Alexander McLeod wrote *The Life and Power of True Godliness* (1816).¹⁶

The position of the ministers of the Church on the matter of political dissent did not preclude their speaking out on political and social issues. McLeod puts it tersely in the first of his series of sermons in defense of the American cause in the War of 1812: ‘Ministers have the right of discussing from the pulpit those political questions which affect Christian morals.’¹⁷ The Church took a particularly strong stand on the slavery question, expressed in McLeod’s *Negro Slavery Unjustifiable* (1804); and as early as 1802 we read in the *Minutes of the Reformed Presbytery*: ‘It was enacted that no slaveholder should be allowed the communion of the Church.’¹⁸

15. G. McMaster, *An Essay in Defence of Some Fundamental Doctrines of Christianity*, 1815, 2.

16. Cf. J. R. Willson’s article on Hopkinsianism in the *Evangelical Witness* (Nov., 1822, 170), the magazine of the American Evangelical Tract Society: ‘We tremble while we record these heresies [*e.g.*, universal redemption] held by men who call themselves Christ’s ministers.’ Quoted in Carson, 75.

17. Carson, 88. Cf. A. McLeod, *A Scriptural View of the Character, Causes, and Ends of the Present War* (2nd ed.), 1815.

18. *Minutes* (1798-1809), 3 (1802). Cf. *RPE*, 143 f.; *Digest*, 135 f.. Cf. also D. R. Wilcox, *The Reformed Presbyterian Church and the Anti-Slavery Movement*

As might be expected, one of the chief topics for discussion was the matter of the application of Christian principles to existing governments. It was chiefly differences in this area that led to the lamentable Disruption of 1833.

Disruption and Recovery

In 1833 the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America experienced a division which up to the present has been permanent. The majority adhering to the General Synod became known as the New Light *General Synod*, the minority as simply the Old Light *Synod*. The Disruption of 1833 has its origins in the early years of the nineteenth century. To understand this momentous dispute in the Church it is necessary to mention some of the developments which led up to it.¹⁹

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the Church's application of James McKinney's principle of dissent from the U.S. Constitution precluded swearing allegiance, voting in elections, office-holding, serving on juries, and serving in the militia. According to Samuel Wylie's *Two Sons of Oil* (1803), these practices are inadmissible on the basis of their being considered an approval of the government's illegitimate authority. In 1806 the Reformed Presbytery declares that serving on juries and taking an oath of allegiance before the civil magistrate are inconsistent with the testimony of the Reformed Presbyterian Church. Likewise, the historical part of *Reformation Principles Exhibited* declares against swearing allegiance to the federal constitution.²⁰

(Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Colorado State University), 1948; and, A. E. Murray, *Presbyterians and the Negro—A History*, 1966, 129 f.

19. For a general account of the Disruption from the New Light side, see *RPE*, 175 ff. For the Old Light point of view see *RPEOL*, 122 ff. (esp. 142 ff.); and W. M. Glasgow, *History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in America*, 1888, 85 ff.

20. S. B. Wylie, *The Two Sons of Oil or The Faithful Witness for Magistracy and Ministry upon a Scriptural Basis* (3rd ed.), 1806 (cf. Carson, 60 ff.). *Minutes* (1798-1809), 31 f. (1806). *Reformation Principles Exhibited*, 1807, 134 ff. Much of this section is expunged from the later New Light editions of *RPE* (cf. *RPE*,

Because of their refusal to take an oath of allegiance to the Constitution, many immigrant Covenanters were still technically alien citizens of Great Britain, having never become naturalized citizens of the United States. Despite their loyalty this official status was cause for some embarrassment when, with the outbreak of the War of 1812, the Government ordered all aliens on the Atlantic coast to remove into the interior. To relieve this embarrassment, the Reformed Presbyterian Synod declared on behalf of Church members that,

. . . they approve of the republican form of the civil order of the United States and the several States; that they prefer this nation and its government to any other nation and government; that they will support to the utmost the independence of the United States and the several States, against all foreign aggressions and domestic *factions*, and disclaim all allegiance to any foreign jurisdiction whatever.

The Synod also instructed Church members who were aliens to swear allegiance to the Government, when required, in terms of the following oath:

I, A. B., do solemnly declare, in the name of the Most High God, the searcher of hearts, that I abjure all foreign allegiance whatsoever, and hold that these States, and the United States, are, and ought to be, sovereign and independent of all other nations and governments, and that I will promote the best interests of this empire, maintain its independence, preserve its peace and *support the integrity* of the Union to the best of my power.²¹

This oath was satisfactory to the Federal Government. In general, the War of 1812 brought Reformed Presbyterians and the Government closer together.

The matter of jury duty came before the General Synod in 1821 at the request of a church member who wants to know whether, given the oath of 1812, it is now permissible to serve. The committee report adopted by Synod states that, ‘No connection with the laws, the officers, or *the order of*

142 f.). As might be expected, they are included in the Old Light editions (*cf.* *RPEOL*, 122, 124 f.).

21. *Digest*, 89 f. For the New Light account of this development, see *RPE*, 182 ff. (esp. 186 f.); for the Old Light account, see *RPEOL*, 130 ff.

the State was prohibited by the Church, except what truly involves immorality.’ This reply certainly seems to remove serving on juries from the Church’s catalog of activities absolutely prohibited. Moreover, when the basic principle to be applied is stated in such a manner, the responsibility for applying the principle seems to be shifted from the Synod to the individual.²²

It is obvious from the foregoing that there were those in the Synod, constituting a majority, whose attitude on certain aspects of the application of the principle of political dissent was changing.²³ Interestingly enough, the leaders in this outlook were the older ministers of the Church who had been ordained by the old Reformed Presbytery back before the constitution of the General Synod—such as Alexander McLeod, Samuel Wylie, John Black, and Gilbert McMaster. These men felt that the progressive testimony of the Church, in view of the changing circumstances of the times, demanded cautious changes in the application of truth. On the other hand, there were those, chiefly the younger ministers, who, along with many of the laymen, felt that any such changes were not merely an indisposition to carry on the testimony, but its outright abandonment. These men were suspicious of the leaders of the Church, the result no doubt of a deeply rooted suspicion in the Covenanter mentality caused by the repeated defection of their leaders in the past—for example Shields in 1690, Craighead soon after 1743, and Cuthbertson in 1782. Thus two ‘opposing moods,’ in the language of Carson, were emerging in the Church.²⁴

22. Cf. Carson, 96. ‘This shift is important in assessing the changing attitude of the church.’ This was not, however, the exact intention of Synod. For when the matter came up again in 1823, the Synod recommended that ‘the inferior Judicatories of this Church be directed to determine on a due consideration of the practice of the several courts of jurisprudence, whether the juror comes under the operation of an immoral law, in the several courts of their own bounds, and give instruction to their people according to the special state of the case.’ *Digest*, 90 (cf. 95 f.). Note the enigmatic pronouncement of 1825: ‘This Synod never understood any act of theirs, relative to their members sitting on juries, as contravening the old common law of the Church on that subject.’ (91).

23. On the reality of this change of outlook, see Hutchison, *History*, 408; Carson, 99; Clark, 50; and *RPE*, 188 *et al.*

24. Carson, 99.

Involved in these two moods was not simply a difference of opinion on the matter of civil dissent, but also on the matter of ecclesiastical dissent. In Carson's words: 'A new mood was developing in the church, "a weariness of difference."' ²⁵ This mood is evidenced by the fact that in about 1830 several of the younger ministers of the Church left to affiliate with the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A.²⁶ It is also revealed in the Synod's discussion of a proposed plan of correspondence with the General Assembly.

Dr. McLeod presented a lengthy address to the Synod in favor of the plan. He begins by attempting to make clear that the plan is one of correspondence, and not a plan of organic union or a scheme of ecclesiastical communion. Such in the existing state of affairs would be 'altogether impracticable.' Furthermore, organic union alone should never be an end in itself and is certainly not the sole solution to the problem of schism in the visible church. For harmony there must be mutual agreement. 'There is really more sweet and refreshing religious fellowship between Christian men mutually acquainted, though members of separate ecclesiastical bodies, than can ever exist between persons of heterogeneous sentiments, though they happen to meet in the visible communion of the same denomination.'²⁷

On the other hand, we have no guarantee that the present schism in Christ's body will continue! Is not the unity of the

25. *Ibid.*, 97.

26. *RPEOL*, 138. These included James Renwick Johnston, the son-in-law of Alexander McLeod and Erasmus Darwin McMaster, the son of Gilbert McMaster. Later on (1838) another son of Dr. McMaster joined the General Assembly. See Glasgow, 550, 612-614. *Cf. RPE* 114, on the Synod of Philadelphia: 'They adopted no fixed ecclesiastical standards. They only professed adherence to the Westminster confession of faith in its essential doctrines, and each person was to be judge in his own case of what was essential. In this constitution were laid those seeds of discordant principles and general debility which have since characterized the Presbyterian Church in this country, under the direction of a general assembly.' These words were apparently written by Alexander McLeod.

27. A. McLeod, *Address to the Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, etc.* (May, 1827), 7 (*cf.* 11). An example given is the harmony between Archbishop Ussher and Samuel Rutherford as compared with the antipathy between Archbishops Ussher and Laud.

visible Church asserted in the Scriptures? Is it not a fundamental principle of Presbyterianism? Is not uniformity of religion a basic principle of the Solemn League and Covenant? Has not God promised to establish the true religion uniformly over the whole earth? In the United States blind compulsion is out of the question; such can only come about by means of church cooperation. At this critical juncture, the churches have a great opportunity to influence civil society in America through mutual cooperation and the ballot box; and because of representative institutions and the rule of law in this country, there is great opportunity for moral and religious reform. Indeed, it may be possible for the Christian people of America to confer, by their choice of representatives, a religious character upon the whole of their civil institutions.

Dr. J. R. Willson spoke briefly against the plan. He reminds the Synod that only four years before Dr. McLeod himself had vehemently spoken against such an idea. This fact is proof that there has been ‘some considerable change’ of mind in the Synod. Willson reviews the history of the General Assembly and, given its latitudinarian character and lax discipline, sees no reason to submit to the ‘unholy catholic spirit of the age’—a spirit which is ‘tearing up the very foundations of the fabric which our reforming ancestors have

28. *Ibid.*, 32 ff. McLeod, interestingly, appeals not only to the present opportunities facing the Reformed Presbyterian Church, but also to the dangers. The Church is in a transitional period, and the greatest dangers stem not from without but from within. “The greatest danger is from ourselves; for if this Church perish in America before the Millennium, its death is inflicted by its own Synod. Its constitution is good; its principles and its usages are well-defined; but its interests are about to be confided to the management of another generation than that which laid its foundation, and raised its well proportioned superstructure. Innovations, inaction, or misguided action, may inflict a mortal malady’ (33). Cf. the interesting appeal to RP history and tradition: ‘The Christian heroism, and the free and manly spirit it [*i.e.*, ‘the Reformed Presbyterian system of doctrine and order’] requires, may be perverted among a few and far scattered people, to a mind of ecclesiastical Independency, and so to the ruinous neglect of the forms of good order, of the uniformity of religious worship, and at last, of that first principle of Presbyterian Church government, the unity of the Church of God on earth.’ (33).

been rearing since the sixteenth century, at the expense of so much labor, blood, and treasure.’ This liberal spirit is a ‘spurious charity’ which does not rejoice in the truth.²⁹ After strenuous debate the plan of correspondence was defeated.

In 1828 the Synod appointed J. R. Willson chairman of a special committee on civil relations. The report of this committee was vehemently discussed at the 1830 Synod and rejected. The opposition felt that it was the intent of the report ‘to “fix” the application of the principles of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, respecting civil affairs, to the institutions of Republican America, and this to the minutest detail.’ This the Church, in the interest of the continuity of her synodical pronouncements and the liberty of her inferior courts, was not prepared to do.³⁰ The matter of civil relations was in turn recommitted to another committee consisting of Wylie, Black, and McMaster, with McLeod as chairman. At the Synod of 1831 it was decided to recommend that points of difference on the application of Reformed Presbyterian principles to the civil institutions of the United States be discussed, under the heading ‘Free Discussions,’ in the *American Christian Expositor*, a newly founded Synod magazine edited by Dr. McLeod.³¹

At the Eastern Subordinate Synod in April of 1832, Samuel Wylie was directed to present a Pastoral Address for circulation among the churches. The author of this document states that the basic position of the Church on the matter of civil government is that no civil institution whatever should be approved by any act which shall, by decision of the local judicatories, involve immorality. However, the Government

29. *Argument Against the Treaty of Correspondence with the General Assembly* (Speech of Dr. Willson in General Synod, 1827), printed in *A Letter from the Rev. C. B. M’Kee. . . on the Minutes and Covenant of the Spurious General Synod* (Philadelphia, August, 1833), 43-51 (cf. 44, 49-51).

30. *Digest*, 97 (cf. Glasgow, 87). These sentiments are expressed in the letter of the General Synod to the RP Synods of Scotland and Ireland, Dec. 28, 1833, and reprinted in *Digest*, 92-122. This letter is an excellent source of the majority’s account of the Disruption, and will be referred to below.

31. *Digest*, 76 (Session XV, 1831).

of the United States does not in fact fall into this category. 'It is susceptible of demonstration, that since the commencement of Christianity, no government on earth has had a fairer claim to recognition as the ordinance of God, than that of these United States.' There is nothing 'positively immoral' in the Constitution. On the one hand, it recognizes the natural rights of man, protecting his person, property, and religious freedom; while, on the other, it makes provision for its own self-reformation by means of the ballot box. The only objectionable element in the Constitution, which could possibly involve immorality, is its protection of slavery, and that institution is fast disappearing as fast as man's fallen state will allow.³²

These sentiments were objectionable to certain members of the Subordinate Synod who managed to have them expunged from the document. Certain others, some of whom had voted for deletion on the ground of expediency, nevertheless wished to see the publication of the original draft as a part of the 'free discussions' authorized by the General Synod. The publication of this letter caused a furor in the Church. J. R. Willson inaugurated the *Albany Quarterly* as a rival publication to the Synod's *American Christian Expositor*, and the war of words was on.³³

In November of 1852 the moderator, William Gibson, was persuaded to call an extraordinary *pro re nata* meeting of the Eastern Subordinate Synod to consider the matter of the publication of the Pastoral Address. Most of the ministers, including the stated clerk, refused to attend on the grounds that no sufficient reason for a *pro re nata* meeting existed, and that distance and weather made it impossible to attend. A libel was prepared against the ministers responsible for

32. *The Original Draft of a Pastoral Address from the Eastern Subordinate Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church*, 1832, 8-12. Cf. Carson, 100 f.; *Digest*, 101.

33. For the various differing accounts of the events surrounding the publication of the Pastoral Address, see for instance *RPE*, 190 f.; *Digest*, 100 ff., 196 f.; *RPEOL*, 142 f.

publishing the Pastoral Address, charging them with following divisive courses, contempt of the authority of Synod, error in doctrine, and abandonment of the Testimony of the Church. The next stated meeting of the Eastern Subordinate Synod in April of 1833 was a tumultuous one. The *pro re nata* men, happening to be in the majority, suspended the libelled ministers from the ministry and excommunicated them from the Church.³⁴

The position of the *pro re nata* men was somewhat as follows: The U.S. Constitution is seriously deficient from a Christian point of view. It makes no reference to the existence or providence of the Supreme Being, it does not recognize the revealed will of God, and it acknowledges no subjection to the Lord Jesus Christ. Moreover, it contains 'positive immoral principles' in that it recognizes slavery on the one hand and precludes the civil recognition or support of the Christian religion on the other.³⁵ Their attitude is well expressed in a sermon entitled *Truth* by S. M. Willson: 'Some persons have found their way into the Reformed Presbyterian Church, who appear unwilling to bear the cross which has always been the portion of those who have borne a faithful testimony against the evils which exist in the corrupt constitutions of church, and state.' These men claim to have 'new light,' and yet they claim not to have changed the distinctive principles of the Church. The word for them is: 'If you are weary of our principles, leave us.' These men want the Church to reform society, but only when the Church walks in truth does she exert her influence on society.³⁶

The attitude of the 'new light' men is well expressed in Gilbert McMaster's *Brief Inquiry into the Civil Relations of*

34. For the various accounts of these meetings, see *RPE*, 191 ff.; *Digest*, 104 ff., 201 ff.; *RPEOL*, 143 f. *Digest*, 106, maintains that the *pro re nata* men were in the minority in April. But if this were so, why did the others leave the assembly?

35. Carson, 100.

36. S. M. Willson, *Truth: A Sermon on Steadfast Adherence to the Distinctive Doctrines of the Church* (Dec. 3, 1832), 1833, 22-24. Cf. Glasgow, 93.

the Reformed Presbyterians in the United States (1833). McMaster appeals for harmony in the Church in order to fulfill her evangelistic mission. The specific issue in the controversy is whether some in the Church are pleading for connections with the governments of the land inconsistent with sound morality as indicated by the public testimony of the Church. There follows then a review of the 'progressive acts' of the Synod since 1806. 'The movements of the church amidst peculiar difficulties . . . have been progressive, and far from precipitate. Her faith and aims were uniform. The application of her principles by judicative deeds were cautious. With the elder ministers of the Church has been *no change of principle?*' Their basic attitude can be summed up in these words:

No truth must be buried, nor must any correct application of it, competent to us, be omitted or forgotten. In guarding against those evils we must take care of the opposite extremes. Let not our communion be marred by an *unauthorized* multiplication of its terms. That an opinion is true, or that an act is duty, is not sufficient to justify the making of them conditions of Church fellowship.

Furthermore, we should always be on guard against confounding the state of the Reformation Testimony in the British Isles with that in the United States.³⁷

The stated meeting of the General Synod met in Philadelphia on August 7, 1833. When the former moderator arose to address the assembly, he was shouted down as an excommunicant who had no right to speak. Thereupon the *pro re nata* men left the assembly, calling upon 'all the faithful' to follow

37. G. McMaster, *Brief Inquiry, etc.*, 1833, 3, 6, 8 ff, 18-22. For a reply to McMaster, see D. Scott, *An Exposure of Dr. McMaster's "Brief Inquiry,"* 1833; R. Gibson, Letter of March 26, 1833, to the Editor of the *Albany Quarterly*, in S. M. Willson, *op. cit.*; and 'McMaster's Inquiry Corrected' in M'Kee, *op. cit.*, 28-43. With regard to the nature of the progressiveness of the Church's testimony, the *pro re nata* men in general would appeal to *RPE* XXXIII, 2, 3: 'The testimony of the church is progressive, in order to oppose and condemn the moral errors which each period may produce. . . . The church may not recede from a more clear and particular testimony to a more general one.' See Chesnut, *Sketch*, 4 f., for an account of McMaster's opinions on civil relations especially as found in the *Memoirs of the Late Alexander McLeod*, 136 ff.

them to a designated place for the purpose of constituting a Synod faithful to the Covenanted Reformation.³⁸ The General Synod, with all its officers and in possession of all its records, proceeded with the business before it.³⁹

In December of 1833 the General Synod sent a long letter of explanation to the Reformed Presbyterian Synods of Scotland and Ireland. The basic point at issue in the Disruption was the proper application of Reformed Presbyterian principles to the civil institutions of the United States.

The simple question was, What application of these principles is the church called upon to make in republican America, confessedly without the boundaries of the empire of the Man of sin, free from the crime of violating solemn covenant engagements, having never persecuted the saints of God, having never degraded the church of God to the condition of a mere engine of state policy; the refuge of the oppressed, and the theatre on which God has chosen to exemplify to the nations the fact that man is capable of self-government in subordination to himself.

There was diversity of sentiment on this point, but not sufficient to justify schism in the body of Christ. 'The diversity was not upon the question of principle, but of its reduction to practice in a particular case.'⁴⁰ This matter of application should not be the business of the General Synod, but should rather be 'regulated by individual discretion, or sessional and Presbyterial authority.' Nevertheless, visionary novices, full of personal ambition and private resentments have forced 'this groundless inconsiderate schism' onto the pages of

38. For the New Light account of these events, see *RPE*, 195 ff.; for the Old Light account *RPEOL*, 147 f. For the subsequent history of the Old Light Synod, see Carson, *History* (to 1871), 105 ff.; Glasgow, *History* (to 1888); and *A Brief History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America*, 1964. For source materials see such items as the *Minutes of the Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, The Reformed Presbyterian* (1837-1862), and *The Reformed Presbyterian and Covenanter* (1863-1896). For the position of the Old Light Synod of today, see *The Constitution of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America*, 1949.

39. *Digest*, 188-191. For a somewhat lengthy account of the events of the Disruption from the General Synod's standpoint, see *Digest*, 191-211, 'A Brief Reference to Previous Events.' Cf. *Proceedings of the General Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America*, Session XVI (Phila., Aug., 1833), 1833,38.

40. *Digest*, 94.

church history. As for the present condition and future prospects of the Church, these are ‘highly prosperous.’ A little less than two-thirds of the members of the Church have remained loyal to the Synod. ‘The church has passed through the storm, and we trust a calm has now arrived.’⁴¹

After the Disruption of 1833 the General Synod made a remarkable recovery. A prime example is the launching of a mission to India in 1835.⁴² Synod’s Board of Foreign Missions was organized in 1833 in the midst of the Disruption, and in 1835 the Rev. J. R. Campbell and family were sent to India. Others soon followed, and by the time of his death in 1862 Dr. Campbell, despite the loss of wife and all five children, had managed to establish an orphan home, a school, a seminary, several congregations, and a growing presbytery.⁴³

In 1843 the General Synod decided to meet annually. In 1845 Synod approved a plan of union by confederation with other Presbyterian Churches believing in the divinely ordained unity of the visible church.⁴⁴ In 1846 the Synod declared against any alteration of the Confession of Faith with a view to church union. In 1848 a Reformed Presbyterian Book of Discipline was adopted, and in 1850 a Reformed Presbyterian Directory for the Worship of God.⁴⁵ In 1852 *Reformation Principles Exhibited* was republished with a new section expounding the recent history and present position of

41. *Ibid.*, 100, 98, 109, 112. Cf. *ibid.*, 113 ff. and *Proceedings*, 1833, 37.

42. Note the comment of a late generation in *The Reformed Presbyterian Advocate (RPA)*, 5:11 (Nov., 1871), 326: ‘With it [*i.e.*, the Mission to India] the church rose from the prostrations of the first disruption of 1833.’

43. *RPE*, 203 ff.; *Digest*, 121; C. G. Scott, *A Brief History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Together With a Report of Its Missionary Operations in India*, 1894, 8-11.

44. *Plan of Union by Confederation Presented to the General Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in 1845*, 1845, 5-8. This document is interesting in that it reveals that the General Synod’s terms of union were no less strict than its terms of communion.

45. *RPE*, 215, 222 f. These had been prepared in substantial form many years before. For a reprint of these documents, as they basically were in 1850, see *The Discipline of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America*; and *Directory for the Worship of God in the Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America, Together with Rules for Judicatories and Forms of Order*, 1921.

the Reformed Presbyterian Church authored by Gilbert McMaster. The author reviews the Disruption of 1833 in defense of the General Synod.⁴⁶ He then proceeds to explain the Church's position on church union. Contemporary attempts demand an alteration of time-honored Reformed Presbyterian ecclesiastical standards, not only in phraseology but also in substance; whereas the Church is committed to the 'whole doctrine' of the Westminster Confession. To conclude:

We have had our agitations, our trials, and our reverses; but through the good hand of our God upon us, in the number of our ministers, congregations, and Presbyteries, we far exceed what we ever were, at any former period, in this land. . . . Not having seen any good reason for abandoning any part of the Reformation standards, the Reformed Presbyterian portion of the great Christian family stands organically distinct, but not fundamentally or essentially separated from the rest. Our attitude is not that of hostility to any department of the household of faith. As far as common ground is occupied by all, . . . we are fellow-laborers with them, in the same field and for the same great results.⁴⁷

An optimistic spirit is echoed in the addresses given at the dedication of the new building of the First Reformed Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia in April of 1854. The pastor, T. W. J. Wylie, speaks of the Church as working in the age of 'triumphant progress,' while J. N. McLeod's message is that the little flock will most certainly soon possess the kingdom (Luke 12:32).⁴⁸ The same spirit is exuded in McLeod's address to the General Synod on the 50th anniversary of the adoption of their Testimony. He reviews the fruit of this

46. *RPE*, 297 ff. 'To the progress of our ecclesiastical movements and success in those movements, there were no impediments from the state of things without; none except what arose directly from the evils of the human heart. The peculiar principles of the Reformation, in their bearing upon the public morality of the social state, were imbuing the public mind, and the prospects of Reformed Presbyterianism were highly promising' (175), *etc.* The student of the Disruption of 1833 should carefully read these pages. There is no more complete statement on record of the attitude of the majority.

47. *RPE*, 207 ff., (esp. 224 f.).

48. *Discourses Delivered at the Opening of the First Reformed Presbyterian Church, Broad Street, Philadelphia, April 30, 1854*, 1854, 12 *et al.* The third discourse, entitled 'The Worship of the Lord in His Sanctuary,' was given by the famous Scottish missionary, Alexander Duff.

testimony. In 1806 the Church numbered about five hundred with ten or twelve congregations, five ministers, and one presbytery; whereas now in 1856 she numbers about seven thousand members with about one hundred congregations, sixty ministers, and seven presbyteries.

The church as a whole is now in comparative peace; she is extending her borders, she sends her foreign missionaries to the heathen; she prepares to send the Gospel to the Jews; she co-operates with other Christians in doing good at home; and who can tell what God has accomplished by her organization, for the last half century in converting sinners to Christ, and in preparing his redeemed for glory? Who shall say that the witness has finished his testimony, and that God is done with this organization?⁴⁹

However, this peace and progress would not last for long; for scarcely a dozen years would pass, and those who were convinced that God was in fact through with the General Synod would force another division upon the Church. In fact, the First Church of Philadelphia would be the center of the storm.

Division and Decline

In 1859 the General Synod, as might be expected, rejected a plan of union with the United Presbyterian Church formed in 1858, on the grounds that such would divide the Synod, sever connections with Reformed Presbyterians in other lands, and relieve them of their distinctive testimony.⁵⁰ As also might be expected, the Church, having taken an active part in the anti-slavery movement, did not, like the main-line Presbyterian bodies, divide on the slavery question with the coming of the Civil War. The men of the General Synod were ardent unionists, and the War was to them simply the putting down of a criminal rebellion instigated by a slaveholding aristocracy.⁵¹ It was a providential vindication of

49. J. N. McLeod, *Revived Memories: An Address to the General Synod, etc.*, 1856, 22.

50. *Proceedings of the General Synod*, 1859, 26-29.

51. *Minutes of the General Synod, etc.*, 1864, 25.

their time-honored position on the slavery question. Soon after emancipation they organized an educational and ecclesiastical mission to the freedmen.⁵²

The early 1860's witnessed not only an explosive restlessness in the nation but also in the churches. An indication of such in the Reformed Presbyterian Church is observed in the report of a special Committee on Psalmody and Ecclesiastical Communion to the General Synod of 1860. The adopted report denounces uninspired psalmody and open communion as contrary to the standards of the Church. It reminds ministers and ruling elders of their ordination vows to follow no divisive courses with regard to the doctrine and order of the Church and to submit to the authority of her courts in the Lord.⁵³

Ironically enough, the seat of distraction and division was to be found in the city of brotherly love. An influential group of men in the First Reformed Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia had come to the conclusion that the evangelical, and especially the Presbyterian, churches of America were needlessly dividing their strength and hindering their usefulness by quarreling over nonessential points of doctrine and

52. *Minutes*, 1865, 37: 'The people have been crushed, their moral sensibilities have been blunted, their minds have been dwarfed; they need to have new life and energy infused into them, to be inspired with a sense of their manhood, to have their slumbering consciences awakened, to have their minds expanded. The slave power has used all its efforts to crush manhood out of them, to sink them to the level of the brute. These people need to have this tremendous weight of oppression removed from their shoulders, that they may feel that they are men—free, responsible human beings; a load of hate, of scorn, of prejudice, has been heaped upon them; the race is now threatened with destruction, of being ground to powder between the upper and nether millstones of Southern secession and Northern prejudice and hate. It is time for the friends of humanity, the believers in the holy religion which proclaims liberty to the captive and the opening of the prison to them that are bound, which teaches that God made of one blood all the nations of the earth, that all are one in Christ—it is time for them to come to the rescue and help these poor emancipated slaves to enter into the enjoyment of the blessings of liberty and a free Gospel.'

53. *Proceedings*, 1860, 13. Cf. *Digest*, 136-140; *Minutes*, 1866, 46-51. Cf. *Proceedings*, 1861, 11. 'Throughout our Church, there seems to be no root of bitterness, no distracting or divisive element; but on the contrary, an increased measure of brotherly love, and a sincere attachment to the great principles of a covenanted Reformation.' In light of events, this was mere wishful thinking.

practice. They were especially anxious to bring the General Synod into an organic union of all the various Presbyterian bodies. In this connection, certain Reformed Presbyterian distinctives, especially exclusive psalmody and closed communion, became prime targets of discussion, and even ridicule.

The leaders of this group were the pastor, the Rev. T. W. J. Wylie, and the illustrious clerk of session, George H. Stuart. Stuart had for many years been perhaps the most prominent man in the Church. As a prosperous businessman he had been the treasurer of the Board of Missions and the publisher of the *Banner of the Covenant*, Synod's semi-official magazine. Moreover, he had gained national recognition and prominence as the President of the Christian Commission during the Civil War, and as the Chairman of the Presbyterian Union Convention which gathered in his home church in September 1867. Both Stuart and Wylie were recent converts to the cause of church union, having staunchly defended Reformed Presbyterian distinctives in years gone by.⁵⁴ However, these men had now come to believe that the General Synod would never prosper in its solitary course and must relinquish its distinct existence for absorption into a united Presbyterian Church.

The opposition to this outlook in the Church is pronounced. The most influential organ of opposition was the *Reformed Presbyterian Advocate* which began publication in January 1867, under the editorship of David Steele assisted later by Nevin Woodside. As early as 1865 the Synod had expressed dissatisfaction with the *Banner of the Covenant* and authorized a periodical which could be considered an organ of the Church.⁵⁵ The design of the *Advocate* is frankly

54. *RPA*, 3:3 (Mar., 1869); 3:5 (May, 1869), 143 ff, 'Former Teachings on Psalmody.' For instance, Stuart had defended exclusive psalmody in the *Banner of the Covenant*; and Wylie could declare as late as 1858 that it was their rigidity in doctrine and discipline, and their cleaving to an inspired psalmody, that gave Reformed Presbyterians a moral power and reason to expect the blessing of God.

55. *Minutes*, 1865, 20, 39.

‘conservative.’ The Reformed Presbyterian system must not be broken up. ‘The old path which godly men in days gone by took to serve the Lord here and glorify him hereafter, is not now to be despised.’ The distinctive testimony of the Church is not to be surrendered in the interests of church union. ‘We dare not sacrifice that which we have so long regarded as the truth once delivered to the saints, without dishonoring our Master.’⁵⁶

The *Advocate* is not opposed to union in the visible church of Christ, but is opposed to those ill-defined attempts which can only multiply schism in the household of God and dishonor his truth. Unions of mere expediency are without foundation and generally fail to produce their intended goals. Before organic union can take place upon proper grounds, church members must be ‘perfectly joined together in the same mind, and in the same judgment.’⁵⁷ Especially singled out as an object of attack is the Presbyterian Union Convention of 1867, to which the General Synod had, at the instigation of Stuart, sent a delegation.⁵⁸ The convention represents the union craze in the Reformed Presbyterian Church and ‘the latitudinarianism which has no charity for anything but itself.’ Its basis for union is innocuous in that—despite mention of the Bible, the Westminster Standards, and Presbyterian church government—there is no mention of such Reformed Presbyterian distinctives as the prohibition of instrumental music, the headship of Christ over all things, and public social covenanting. Furthermore, the Convention is not clear on the Psalms. It is vain to attempt to justify hymn singing with an appeal to the spiritual prosperity of the churches that sing hymns. ‘The Reformed Presbyterian Church sings the songs of the Bible by divine appointment.’

56. *RPA*, 1:1 (Jan., 1867), 1-6. There is constant appeal to the apostolic precept: ‘Whereunto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing’ (Phil. 3:16).

57. *RPA*, 1:2 (Feb., 1867), 40-45, ‘Union in the Church of God.’

58. *Minutes*, 1867, 5, 21.

Anything else is mere ‘Whimnology.’ Acceptance of such a basis would mean loss of identity, ecclesiastical schism, and sacrifice of principle. ‘Union must exist in fact before it can exist in form, and it must be voluntary to be real. . . . Union is not to be made over the grave of buried truth.’⁵⁹

Foremost before the Synod of 1868 were the matters of church union and the behavior of one Mr. Stuart.⁶⁰ With regard to the former, Dr. S. W. Crawford declares:

What good has come to our church from these connections? None: but in my view, positive evil. They have loosened the attachment of our people, particularly our ministers, to their church. They have relaxed efforts to build her up, to lengthen her cords and strengthen her stakes. They have turned away the eyes of the people from her own carved work, the venerable work of the Reformation, to look on that of others, comparatively but of yesterday. They have opened the mouths of many to cry out we cannot live, we must seek connection with other bodies or we are ruined. Until this cry of *wolf* was raised in the Reformed Presbyterian Church she was prospering, was growing and maintaining her testimony, carrying forward the Reformation cause, and working for Jesus, his crown, rights, and glory, as ruler of the world.⁶¹

With regard to Stuart, with Synod in such a mood, it was not likely that he would be spared. By a vote of 28 to 14 the Synod suspended him from church membership until he should acknowledge his error in the matter of defying ecclesiastical authority, in using uninspired hymns and taking communion in other churches. This action was based on the Synod’s possessing ‘original as well as appellate jurisdiction over all persons and all matters under its supervision and care.’⁶²

59. *RPA*, 1:3 (Mar., 1867), 81; 1:10 (Oct., 1867), 307, 364 ff.; 2:4 (April, 1868), 120 f. – cf. 119–122, ‘Union Convention’s Basis?’

60. During the General Synod of 1867 George H. Stuart was charged with practicing an ‘unauthorized Psalmody,’ that is, with using hymns in Sabbath school missions. These charges were either withdrawn or ruled out of order. *Minutes*, 1867, 13, 31, 36.

61. *RPA*, 2:10 (Oct., 1868), 315 f., 317. On the matter of church communion, Crawford thunders: ‘To allow persons to be themselves, independently of church authority, judges of their fitness to go to the communion table! Those who are admitted to communion should be under the authority and discipline of the church in which they commune.’

62. *Minutes*, 1868, 29 f.

Several members of Synod protested this action. The reply to this protest reduces the arguments proffered to three: disorder in the mode of procedure, unkindness in the circumstances of the case, and partiality in the application of church law. As to the first, the General Synod are the only interpreters of their own law. It belongs to them alone to say how rules of order are to be applied, and from their decision there is no appeal. Also, the procedures in the Book of Discipline refer to cases where charges are denied, not to those where they are openly admitted on the floor of Synod. Second, the charges of unkindness simply are not true. What about Mr. Stuart's unkindnesses to the Synod? Third, it is true that Synod wisely overlooked many things occurring during the confusions of the Civil War which could not be made precedents for peaceful times. Finally, the case of Stuart is peculiar to itself. No one else had *openly* defied and ridiculed the authority of Synod.⁶³ It seems as if George Stuart, in the eyes of the Synod men, was to them what Charles Stuart had been to their forefathers!

Synod's action in the Stuart case caused a furor across the nation and Christian world at large. For the most part the publicity was decidedly hostile, so that the *United Presbyterian* could inquire: 'Will there be a possibility that the Reformed Presbyterian Church can survive the shock that this onslaught will produce?' Some publicity was favorable, however. For instance an Iowa newspaper declared:

The Reformed Presbyterian Church stands boldly against what it believes to be wrong, no matter by whom committed. None of its members ever crushed the spirit and soul of a human being . . . in slav-

63. *Ibid.*, 63 ff. An interesting defense, to say the least! For an extensive presentation of the opposing point of view, see *An Opinion of Counsel on the Action of the General Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in the Case of Mr. George H. Stuart*, 1868, *e.g.*, 3: 'The Synod, as legislative body, was competent to vacate Mr. Stuart's seat for sufficient cause, but not for any cause whatever to deprive him of church membership and of his office of ruling elder. Only as a court could they effect that, and to do so it was necessary that they should try, convict and sentence him in accordance with the laws they were constituted to administer.'

ery, and remained a member of the church. Their ministers preached against slavery and their writers wrote against it, and the children of the Sabbath schools were taught it was wrong, while other churches let this most abominable of American sins go unrebuked because it was “politics.” All honor to the Reformed Presbyterian Church for insisting that their members shall adhere to their doctrines or go from them.⁶⁴

As might be expected there was also a hostile reaction in the Church itself. In what came to be called the Eastern Secession, several ministers and members left the General Synod under the leadership of Wylie. The Pittsburgh Presbytery, or rather a majority faction thereof, suspended relations with the Synod until such time as the action taken against Mr. Stuart should be rescinded, and, under the leadership of the Rev. J. S. Woodside, the Saharanpur Presbytery in India did the same, resulting in Synod’s losing its entire Indian mission.⁶⁵

I have not one feeling in common with . . . any of those who have condemned Mr. Stuart for singing hymns and communing with other Christians. . . . The wretched handful of men, who try to force down the throats of their denuded followers principles which neither they nor their fathers could bear, make themselves simply contemptible. . . . It is this grasping after the shadow of former things, resting on a good name, and on good traditions, that has made our miserable little church the laughing stock of the world. . . . I hope the fair name of the Reformed Presbyterian Church will ere long be redeemed from the stigma that now attaches to it. Wretched men that they are—if they were only half as anxious to save souls, as to fight about little technicalities, how much better it would be.⁶⁶

Others through the years have had varying attitudes toward the Stuart case. For instance, to some ‘a doctrinal issue’ was at stake.⁶⁷ To others things could have been different if

64. *RPA*, 2:11 (Nov., 1868), 364 (*cf.* 368). *Cf.* 2:9 (Sept., 1868), 309; 2:10 (Oct., 1868), 342.

65. *RPA*, 2:9 (Sept., 1868), 304; 2:10 (Oct., 1868), 377.

66. Quoted in a privately printed circular by D. N. entitled ‘To the Members of the General Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church.’ The pamphlet is in the possession of the Rev. H. H. Meiners, Jr. Oddly enough, J. S. Woodside, after opposing his brother, N. Woodside, on this question, later attempted to be readmitted to the General Synod. This circular is a protest against that attempt. The Saharanpur Presbytery maintained its organization and eventually returned to the care of the General Synod.

67. Clark, 63.

both sides would have exercised more restraint and wisdom.⁶⁸ To the judge responsible for deciding one of the resultant civil cases, the upshot of the whole affair was the obligation of ecclesiastical bodies to proceed according to their own standard of doctrine and order.⁶⁹

To the men who stayed with the General Synod the men who seceded were new lights. Their distinction between essential and nonessential doctrines has no warrant in Scripture, for Jesus commanded us to teach the nations all those things which he commanded us (Matt. 28:19). The appeal of the *Advocate* is for peace. Able men have tried to introduce hymns and open communion into the Church to make her more popular, more in tune with the spirit of the age. However they have failed. Now let us have peace. 'For the sake of our missions, for the sake of the prosperity of the church, for the sake of the salvation of souls, let this agitation cease.'⁷

When the Synod of 1870 once again rejected union with the United Presbyterians, there occurred what came to be called the Western Secession. After the Synod seven ministers of the Western Presbytery, in disgust over the rejection of union, joined the United Presbyterian Church, taking a large percentage of their congregations with them.⁷¹

The General Synod of 1871 wrote to their Scottish brethren: 'Our ministers and people are unitedly determined to maintain, and, as God may enable them, to apply the great and permanent principles of the Covenanted Reformation.'⁷ In this connection, and given the Church's attitude in the Stuart case, it is not surprising that negotiations for reunion

68. Chesnut, *Sketch*, 8 f.

69. *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, April 18, 1871: 'The great principle that underlay Judge Williams' opinion, was the obligation of ecclesiastical bodies to proceed according to their own standard of doctrine and order.'

70. *RPA*, 3:6 (June, 1869), 161 f., 'Let Us Have Peace' (*cf.* 181). *Cf.* 2:10 (Oct., 1868), 337; 2:11 (Nov., 1868), 345 ff.

71. Chesnut, *Sketch*, 11. 'This stampede was one of the strangest acts to be found in the records of ecclesiastical gymnastics.' *Cf.* *RPA*, 5:1 (Jan., 1871), 27; 7:5 (May, 1873), 175; 7:11 (Nov., 1873), 383.

72. *RPA*, 5:6 (June, 1871), 207; *cf.* 5:11 (Nov., 1871), 347.

with the Old Light Synod were renewed. However such negotiations, though renewed from time to time, always stalled on the civil government issue.⁷³

One of the chief incentives for reunion with the Old Lights was the opportunity for united cooperation in the National Reform Movement. The purpose of this movement, born in the dark days of the Civil War, was to effect a Christian amendment to the Constitution in terms of a formal acknowledgment of the God of the Bible and His Son Jesus Christ.⁷⁴ The National Reform Association was also involved in other areas of moral reform from a Christian point of view. The presupposition behind the movement is the conviction that the United States is 'our Christian Protestant Nation.'⁷⁵ The inspiration back of Reformed Presbyterian participation in it is the cry: 'May the day be hastened when this land shall be in covenant with God.'⁷⁶ The Church, having just passed through internal difficulties, was taken up in the enthusiasm for reform: 'The wheel of moral revolution now turns with amazing rapidity as it is set in motion by the King of kings.'⁷⁷

The Reformed Presbyterian Church was conscious of her own unique place in the reform movement. For instance, we read in an 1880 edition of the *Advocate* that the prime element in reform is piety. Only the Christian Gospel can correct the existing abuses in society. The seat of moral evil is the heart, and that can only be touched by the power of the Holy Spirit. Only the grace of God can effect a real permanent reformation. Reform societies are important auxiliaries,

73. *RPA*, 6:7, 8 (July, Aug., 1872), 249. R. W. Chesnut called this 'the most concise statement on the point of difference between the two Synods that we have found anywhere in our Synodic records' (*Sketch*, 7). He might have observed the statement in *Minutes*, 1889, 9.

74. *Minutes*, 1863, 36 ff.

75. *Digest*, 121 (cf. 186). For instance, the General Synod sent an appeal for recognition of the absolute supremacy of Jesus Christ to the national political conventions of 1884 (*Minutes*, 1884, 19 f.).

76. *RPA*, 8:7, 8 (July, Aug., 1874), 244, 247.

77. *RPA*, 4:12 (Dec., 1870), 375.

but the Church is the only reform society ultimately able to do the job.⁷⁸

The two subjects occupying the most attention in the area of moral reform were the Lord's Day and the liquor traffic. The Reformed Presbyterian Church had always laid great stress on the Sabbath Day. For instance, we read in the autobiography of R. W. Chesnut:

I well remember when the mules were hitched to the lumber wagon on Sabbath morning and eight or ten of the family rode to church and home again, a distance of 20 miles, in the meantime attending Sabbath school and hearing two long sermons, and all were glad to have the privilege. It was to us a great day. At our house, at least, there were no slackers, or complaints about long, dry sermons and irksome Sabbaths. The Sabbath was the day of all days to us. It was the best day of all. When we returned home, supper was served, and then we studied our catechism and memorized portions of psalms or chapters in the Bible. Mother, although strict on the Lord's Day, always made it a day of delight to us children.⁷⁹

In keeping with this spirit the Synod of 1882 rebuked the *nation* for its desecration of the Sabbath, reminded all of the curse attached to such desecration as well as of the blessing involved in keeping the Lord's Day, and commanded all legislative efforts to defend and maintain the sanctity of the Christian Sabbath. With regard to the *church*, the Synod of 1887 declares that the church which encourages loose views of the sacredness of the Lord's Day will soon lose its spirituality and power.⁸⁰

Sabbath desecration and the beverage use of alcohol were closely linked together in the mind of the Church. As one minister remarks, 'The greatest power against the Lord's Day is the saloon power.'⁸¹ The liquor business was looked upon as the greatest evil of the day. As R. W. Chesnut remarks in 1891, 'The liquor traffic is the greatest monster evil of this

78. *RPA*, 14:3 (Mar., 1880), 86 f., 'Elements of Reform.'

79. R. W. Chesnut, *Life and Work: An Autobiography* (Memorial Edition), 1943, 9 f.

80. *Minutes*, 1882, 226 (cf. *Digest*, 183 f.); *Minutes*, 1887, 50 f., (cf. *Digest*, 187). Cf. *Digest*, 143 ff.

81. *Minutes*, 1898, 64.

century.’ It is an unmitigated evil, the gateway to almost every other evil. Thus the General Synod declares in 1893: ‘The liquor traffic cannot be licensed without sin, and . . . the Bible remedy, God’s remedy, and the only remedy for this evil is total abstinence for the individual and absolute prohibition for the State.’⁸²

The General Synod forbade church members to be engaged in the manufacture, sale, or use of alcoholic beverages except for mechanical, medicinal, or sacramental purposes. Neglect of discipline or silence on this great moral question would bring the Church under reproach before the world. Christians should abstain from even the appearance of evil. Ministers should preach temperance—that is, moderation in all things indifferent and abstinence in all things evil. Sabbath school teachers should impress upon the young the advantage of total abstinence from the beverage use of intoxicating liquors.⁸³ The Synod was also, as might be expected, wholeheartedly behind the various temperance societies and the prohibition movement. A legalized evil is unthinkable. ‘God’s law *prohibits*; does not *regulate* evil.’⁸⁴ Besides, ‘the logic of experience has demonstrated that there is but one effective remedy, namely, extermination—Prohibition.’⁸⁵

Behind these pronouncements is a deep sense of the social implications of the Gospel. We read in the report of the Philadelphia Presbytery to the Synod of 1900: ‘The gospel is a remedial system for man in society as well as for man as an individual. It is our uniform custom to keep prominent before our people the great questions of the day, especially those which affect the social interests of society and publicly discuss them, such as temperance, Sabbath observance, and national reform.’⁸⁶ Many other social and political evils came

82. *Minutes*, 1891, 81; 1893, 48.

83. *Minutes*, 1867, 17; *Cf. Digest*, 141, 182 f.

84. *Minutes*, 1882, 213.

85. *Minutes*, 1889, 43 (*cf.* 42). *Cf. Digest*, 140-145, 155 f., 181 ff.

86. *Minutes*, 1900, 69. On the matter of secret societies the General Synod took a strong stand. No member of such an oath-bound society could be a

under the purview of Synod, from lascivious dancing in 1844 to business monopolies in 1893.⁸⁷

It may be a matter of interest to mention the Church's outlook on the millennial question. Traditionally her ministers were postmillennialists and apparently maintained this position throughout the nineteenth century. They took a dim view of the rise of premillennialism. As early as 1856 the Synod unanimously declared that 'the doctrines of Millenarianism, in all or any of its phases, are not the doctrines of the Reformed Presbyterian Church.' The editors of the *Advocate* took occasion to express their disagreement with the premillennialism of the famous Prophetic Conference of 1878, although they expressed appreciation for the ringing emphasis on the return of the Lord.⁸⁸

With regard to doctrinal matters in general, the Church

member of the Church. That this regulation was not always strictly enforced is evident from a complaint received by the Synod of 1884 against the Session of the Fifth Reformed Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia, and the Philadelphia Presbytery, for permitting the election of a Mason to the eldership. Synod's reply is perhaps conciliatory in tone: 'It is only necessary to reiterate the well-known position of our Church, that persons who are active members of oath-bound secret societies are not to be received into the fellowship of the Church, and much less made officers.' *Minutes*, 1884, 31 f (*cf. Digest*, 133 f.). One may well wonder whether this pronouncement was enforced.

87. *Minutes*, 1893, 37; *Digest*, 146: 'As lascivious dancing is sinful, a bad example to the Church and those who are without, calculated to remove the distinction between the Church and the world, interfere with Christian piety and moral purity, to grieve the Holy Spirit and offend God, and is therefore inconsistent with the character of the disciples of the Redeemer—this Synod warns all the youth and others of the Church against the very beginnings of this practice; and enjoins it upon parents and inferior Judicatories to be vigilant and faithful in discountenancing this evil.' The attitude of the Synod of 1893 toward various aspects of the immigration problem is interesting. On the one hand, the Chinese Exclusion Act is condemned for its inhumane and discriminatory aspects. On the other hand, the Committee on the Signs of the Times can report: 'Foreign immigration, laden with the scum and filth of Romish Europe, is flooding our country with the ignorant, vicious, and profligate, until our whole country is full of vagabonds and tramps' (*Minutes*, 1893, 33, 36).

88. *Digest*, 121. *RPA* 12:12 (Dec, 1878), 371 f.; 13:4-6 (April-June, 1879). Later issues carried a series of anti-premillenarian articles on the second coming. Whether a portion of the ministers of the General Synod ever came over to premillennial views much before the mid-twentieth century is an interesting question. That by then some were premillennial is evident from evidence presented below.

was aghast at the inroads of modernism in the mainline Protestant denominations. This new theology would destroy the authority of the Scriptures, dispel the efficacy of the atonement, and comfort the hearts of sinners with the notion of progressive sanctification after death. There was particular apprehension with regard to higher criticism's attack upon the Bible. 'The higher critics would tear the old Bible, which we have learned to love, into shreds.'⁸⁹

For the most part, the last three decades of the nineteenth century were years of decline. Reliable statistics are hard to come by, but we may assume that the Church in 1898, excluding the revived Indian mission, was about half the size of that in 1868. For instance, there were sixty-five congregations in America in 1873 and only thirty-six in 1902.⁹⁰ As early as 1873 this trend was dubbed 'mild decay' by a New York magazine.⁹¹ There were many symptoms of this decline besides the dwindling numbers such as poorly attended Synods, a lack of ministers, and a lack of financial support. Certainly the ministers were poorly paid, and the agencies of the General Synod poorly supported. There is constantly throughout the records the cry of a lack of money. For instance, the Committee on Presbyterial Reports laments in 1884: 'One of the *discouraging* features brought

89. *Minutes*, 1892, 46 f. There was hearty approval of Princeton professor W. H. Green's designation of the higher criticism of the Bible as 'Anti-Biblical Criticism.'

90. *RPA*. 7:11 (Nov., 1873), 384; *Minutes*, 1902, 32. For other allusions to statistics, see the *Minutes* for 1885 (46) and 1891 (51). One factor in this numerical decline is the disaffection with the Church caused by the fact that the Synod of 1880 upheld the Pittsburgh Presbytery's suspension of the Rev. Nevin Woodside from the ministry for an alleged immorality. Woodside had been one of the most eloquent, loyal, and respected ministers of the Synod, and many sincerely doubled his guilt. Concerning this matter R. W. Chesnut remarks 70 years later: 'Often church courts are conducted in such a way that reveals a sad want of wisdom among its members. . . . In the past history of ecclesiastical courts, we find little for which the church has reason to be proud.' *Sketch*, 14. Cf. *RPA*, 14:7. 8 (July, Aug., 1880), 205, 212, 218, 222, 240.

91. *RPA*. 7:11, 382. It should be noted that this 'Christian' magazine had distorted facts and figures regarding the RPCGS.

out by these reports is a *want of liberality* on the part of our people.⁹²

The General Synod decided to republish *Reformation Principles Exhibited* in 1892. In 1899 Professor David Steele wrote in a letter to Reformed Presbyterian brethren in Ireland:

The testimony handed down to us by our fathers, we continue to uphold, in doctrine, worship, discipline and government. It is scarcely necessary to say, that this becomes more difficult as the years roll on. . . . The rights of God, and the honor which belongs to the Mediator, fail to be respected as the Scriptures demand. More than ever, covenanted Presbyterians are placed at a disadvantage, because of the paucity of their numbers and their own divisions.⁹³

However, although the Church had managed to survive all the vicissitudes of the nineteenth century with her distinctive testimony basically in tact, the twentieth century would be one of change and crisis. *Reformation Principles Exhibited* would be republished no more.

Change and Crisis

From the other side of the Atlantic Matthew Hutchison assessed the prospects of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, General Synod, in the 1890's: 'This branch of the Church has become a very small body, destined apparently to speedy extinction.'⁹⁴ However, while near extinction by the mid-twentieth century, the Church would not become extinct, but adapt to its environment and survive.

The Church did show some distinct signs of life in the late nineteenth century. The mission to India had been revived in 1884 and by 1894 was a nourishing work once

92. *Minutes*, 1884, 39. Certainly this is not the image of the Church in *RPE*, 46 f. Cf. *RPEOL*, 128 f., on the giving of the old RP Society People. Cf. *Minutes*, 1882, 215; 1860, 22; 1869, 33. *RPA*, 1885, 146 f. For instance, the theological seminary and the Church college, established at Cedarville, Ohio, in 1894, were always in financial straits. Both eventually petered out in the twentieth century.

93. *Minutes*, 1899, 5. Cf. Steele in a similar letter of 1882 in *Minutes*, 1882, 234: 'Nothing, perhaps, has retarded the progress of the Reformed Presbyterian system so much as the alienations and separations which have taken place among its adherents.'

94. Hutchison, *History*, 410.

again.⁹⁵ Also various home missionary projects were instigated with a measure of success. A Christian liberal arts college was founded in Cedarville, Ohio. Moreover, in the early 1890's a blossoming youth work was begun in the form of Christian Endeavor societies and mission bands. 'From 1896 to 1904 the whole church was full of enthusiasm. Missionary offerings were doubled and in some cases quadrupled.' However, this enthusiasm was extinguished by the crisis that struck the Synod in the first decade of the twentieth century.⁹⁶

Again the matter of church union was in the air. In 1896 Professor Steele had addressed the Presbyterian Historical Society on the history of the General Synod with the hope that the existing divisions within the Presbyterian family would soon be healed with a view to the advent of the Lord in the twentieth century.⁹⁷ It seems that Dr. Steele, the foremost opponent of union in 1867, had over the years come to feel that, in view of the divided state of the Church in the face of modern unbelief, the day was fast approaching when the General Synod should unite with the mainline Presbyterian bodies. Other leaders in the Church had also come to the conviction that the Reformed Presbyterian Church was too small to face the twentieth century alone.

These men presented to the Synod of 1905 a plan of union with the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. After 'very earnest and prolonged discussion,' the members of Synod unanimously decided that—since the Church was divided on the issue, and since the entire energies of the Church ought to be spent in upbuilding her own institutions and evangelical witness at home and abroad—'the whole matter of organic unity [ought to] be postponed until such time as the Great Head

95. Scott, *Brief History*, 12 ff.

96. Chesnut, *Sketch*, 43, 55 f. For a brief account of the history of Cedarville College and of the denominational seminary, see *ibid.*, 15-26.

97. D. Steele, *History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (General Synod)*, Reprinted from the Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society, May, 1901, 14 f. A paper read before the Presbyterian Historical Society, March 16, 1896.

of the Church will bring about a greater unanimity by pouring out the Holy Spirit from on high.⁹⁸ R. W. Chesnut opposed the union 'on the ground that the USA Church was becoming more and more contaminated with modernistic teachings.' A similar plan of union with the United Presbyterian Church was rejected on the same grounds in 1906. These actions of Synod resulted in the withdrawal of several ministers and congregations from the Church.⁹⁹ Perhaps it should be mentioned at this point that, whenever congregations decided to leave the Church, they took their property with them since the General Synod had never become a legally incorporated body.¹⁰⁰

The matter of instrumental music also produced disaffection in the Church at this time. As early as 1900 one of the presbyteries had overtured Synod to permit the use of instrumental music as an aid to the betterment of the praise service of the church.¹⁰¹ Many of those in favor of this move were already using instruments in their church services, and threatened to leave the Synod if their request were denied. The whole matter came to a head in 1905 when the Synod attempted to sidestep the issue by stating that the question of instrumental aid in the praise service should be left to the discretion of the sessions of the various churches, and that in no case should a session introduce an instrument if it should interfere with the peace and harmony of the congregation. Such a decision, in the nature of the case, could only lead to more friction, and many left the denomination on its account.¹⁰²

R. W. Chesnut had vigorously opposed both church union and instrumental music. However, in the course of time even his own church, the historic Duanesburg congregation, ex-

98. *Minutes*, 1905, 45-48, 9. Chesnut, *Sketch*, 34.

99. *Minutes*, 1906, 42 f., 51, 54. Chesnut, *Sketch*, 76.

100. Chesnut, *Sketch*, 34 ff.

101. *Minutes*, 1900, 68.

102. *Minutes*, 1905, 24 f. (Cf. 13, 69 f.).

perienced not only a turning away to musical instruments, but also a 'gradual turning away from the singing of the "sams" (Psalms) to Hymns.'¹⁰³ There had been no musical instruments until Chesnut's pastorate. By 1951 Samuel S. Ward could appeal to the General Synod to return to the Psalms. 'We have adopted songs which are calculated to appeal to the movie-drunk populace we want to win.'¹⁰⁴

Another change in the life of the Church concerns the increasing laxness of her members in the application of the fourth commandment. In 1947 Synod's standing Committee on Sabbath Observance attributes lax views of the Sabbath to modern dispensationalism and secularism, and encourages Reformed Presbyterian ministers to preach in defense of the denomination's stand on the Sabbath against attacks both without and *within* the church. The very need for such vociferous defense indicates that many in the Church were not taking the Lord's Day very seriously. Indeed, in 1955 Charles B. Holliday accuses the denomination of departure from the Scripture and the Westminster Standards in the matter of the Sabbath observance.¹⁰⁵

Still another change witnessed by the twentieth century is the discontinuing of the practice of closed communion. The symbol of this practice was the token issued by the elders as a sign of one's eligibility to partake of the Lord's Supper. As early as 1887 the necessity of the token was questioned at Synod, and in 1890, after heated debate, the matter was laid on the table never to be discussed again.

103. Letter of Edith Fidler to Margaret Meiners (Postmarked Mar. 22, 1969). 'Only the Psalms were sung, the "leader" of the song, used his tuning fork to get the pitch to the tune. . . . Then came the turning away to a musical instrument. A "parlor" pump organ was bought and then by efforts of a Jr. Christian endeavor group, a *piano*. Of all things for a "dyed in the wool" people. Hymns began to creep into the S. S. . . and the church service much to the consternation of the elderly and some bitter words passed, but the Hymns were voted into the "modern" church and are still being sung.'

104. *Minutes*, 1951, 10 f.

105. *Minutes*, 1947, 13 f.; 1955, 11-14. Cf. 1912, 54; 1940, 125 f.; 1941, 127 f.

Nevertheless, in 1896 Professor Steele could say, regarding Reformed Presbyterian custom, that 'communion in the ordinance of the Supper takes place under the sessional jurisdiction, and not simply on the ground of the individual's own personal Christianity.'¹⁰⁶ Whereas we read in the pamphlet celebrating the 150th anniversary of the Duanesburg congregation in 1945: 'Today the partaking or not partaking of this sacrament is left up to the individual's own conscience as he examines his own fitness. The church has shifted the responsibility from its elders to each individual who attends communion.'¹⁰⁷

A closely related change of practice regards the relaxation of church discipline. It is interesting that twice in R. W. Chesnut's history of the General Synod there is mention of ministers with modernistic leanings, and in neither case is there mention of disciplinary proceedings against them.¹⁰⁸

This is not to imply that the General Synod was sympathetic to modernism. The *Minutes* from 1923 to 1937 abound in antimodernistic sentiments. The discarding of the fundamentals is lamented in 1923. In 1931 separation is declared to be the only remedy for those in modernistic denominations. Finally, in 1934 and 1937 modernism is called an 'awful thing,' 'Anti-Christ,' and 'Satanic poison.' The church is in a state of apostasy, and there is great need for reformation.¹⁰⁹

In the face of this modernistic onslaught, there is a certain reaction in the direction of a fundamentalism which is not especially conscious of Reformed Presbyterian distinctives. This attitude is well expressed in L. A. Benson's signs-of-the-times report to the Synod of 1928:

While multitudes about us have been slipping away from the faith of the Gospel, while thousands of young people have not been taught

106. Steele, *History*, 12. Cf. *Digest*, 185; Chesnut, *Sketch*, 31-33.

107. *150th Anniversary, etc.*, 1945, 9 f.

108. Chesnut, *Sketch*. 34, 79. Cf. *150th Anniversary*, 10.

109. *Minutes*, 1923, 128; 1927, 131; 1931, 173; 1934, 136 f.; 1937, 114.

its vast importance, those who should have been teaching and emphasizing that great truth have been fighting about whether one should be immersed or sprinkled in baptism, about whether the cup should be given to the laity, or whether it be right to read prayers, or whether women should hold office or preach, or whether children should be baptized, or if it be right to use an instrument in worship, or shall we sing psalms or hymns in praise? . . . That there is a right and a wrong side to these questions, we must admit, but anyone who is more intent on holding forth his side of any of these minor matters than he is upon holding forth Christ as the only Saviour, is confessing his ignorance of the grace of Christ.¹¹⁰

In this connection it is significant that one of the resolutions adopted in 1944 was that ministers instruct their congregations more diligently in the distinctive doctrines of the Reformed Faith, and in the purity of life which these doctrines promote.

One aspect of this purity of life is still abstinence from the beverage use of alcohol. During the same Synod R. W. Stewart declares on behalf of the standing Committee on Temperance that it will never be possible to drink alcohol with physical or moral safety.¹¹¹ In 1948 the Committee on Temperance attempted to comply with the previous Synod's request to set forth 'the Reformed position on the subject of temperance, particularly in the matter of alcohol.' The committee notes that the word 'temperance' has changed its meaning from moderation in general to abstinence from alcohol in particular. It admits that the subject is not dealt with in the standards of the Reformed Churches. Nevertheless, it seems safe to say that the Reformed, and particularly the Presbyterian, Churches have been sympathetic with the ideal of total abstinence. This is not expressed in their confessions, but in the declarations of their synodical assemblies. The argument of Charles Hodge that the Bible does not teach total abstinence is mentioned.

Yet it has been felt by the great majority in the Presbyterian churches that conditions exist today which make total abstinence the

110. *Minutes*. 1928, 132 (cf. 133 f.).

111. *Minutes*, 1944, 158 f., 124.

only proper course for the Christian. The changed conditions to which we refer have come about through methods that have made intoxicating alcohol plentiful and cheap and a far greater social evil than in the time of either the Old or the New Testaments. . . . We therefore feel that the principle of expediency laid down by the apostle Paul governs the conduct of Christians today. . . . This is, we feel, the attitude of the Reformed and particularly the Presbyterian churches in America to the "temperance question." We believe total abstinence to be the most eminently wise and practical way of dealing with the liquor problem.¹¹²

The opinions of the ministers of the Church on various prominent issues of the day are mirrored in their reports to Synod. As a sample, in 1919 there is great rejoicing that not only had the Kaiser been dethroned but also King Alcohol. The greed and lawlessness of the 1920's is a cause for mourning. In 1932 there is impatience with do-nothing politicians in the midst of the depression. In 1936 it is lamented that big government in the 1930's is just as greedy as big business in the 1920's. The dictatorships of Europe are roundly condemned during the war years; likewise, the government's official connections with the Vatican in 1946. Finally, in 1949 the Federal and World Council of Churches are pitied as organizations building on the sand.¹¹³

At the same time, the General Synod as an organization was, throughout the first half of the twentieth century, in a state of discouragement and decline. Many varied examples of such could be given, as for instance, the lack of interest in the *Reformed Presbyterian Advocate* and in the denominational college and seminary;¹¹⁴ or one might cite the comment of a member of Synod in 1922: 'It was not many weeks ago that I discovered that I was one of the Committee on Evangelism; in fact, that of the three originally named, I am the only one now a member of General Synod;¹¹⁵ or perhaps the fact that by 1942 there were only 1,647 American mem-

112. *Minutes*, 1948, 15 f.

113. *Minutes*, 1919, 19; 1932, 136; 1936, 149; 1946, 28; 1949, 18. The General Synod had been affiliated with the FCCC back when its doctrinal position was not clearly indicated.

114. Chesnut, *Sketch*, 28 ff., 15 ff.; *Autobiography*, 49.

115. *Minutes*, 1922, 30.

bers left in the Church,¹¹⁶ and many of these did not attend church.

There were various reactions in the Synod to this decline. Some, throughout this period of change, called for a return to Reformed Presbyterian distinctives. Others took comfort in the fact that the signs of the times demonstrate that the Church is living in the age of apostasy before the Lord's premillennial return either at the rapture or after the tribulation. Certainly, the old postmillennial doctrine was dead. Some even imbibed a full-fledged dispensational premillennialism.¹¹⁷ Still others urged a vigorous evangelistic effort on the part of the Church. Evangelism should begin in the home, should be the special concern of the eldership, should involve special evangelistic services, and young people's conferences. Often the attitude of church people toward any new method of evangelism was: 'It ain't Reformed Presbyterian.'¹¹⁸

All seemed to no avail. A momentous crisis was upon the General Synod. By 1953 there were, not including the Indian mission, only 1,279 on the rolls of the denomination, and of these the average morning church attendance was only 619. This crisis is nowhere better expressed than in the report of the Committee on the Signs of the Times for that year:

There has been a trend in our church, and the trend, if we translate it rightly, points to an end of our church as such. When we divided from the other branch of the R. P. Church our part was larger than the

116. *Minutes*, 1942, 185.

117. *Minutes*, 1946, 24 f.; 1949, 18; 1955, 14 ff. See the series of articles on prophecy by the Rev. Dr. Harry C. White in *RPA*, 84:1-12 (Jan.-Dec, 1950). See esp. 84:9, 132 f. 'The Christian Church (*ekklesia*) meaning assembly or congregation is distinct from the congregation of the Mosaic dispensation, or Church of the Wilderness. For until Christ came, it was a thing of the future. . . . The Church is peculiar to the New Testament. As an entity it is not to be found in the Old Testament. It is doubtful if the prophets of the Old Testament really knew anything about the Church. It was a matter which seems to have been kept secret from the prophets. Paul, uniquely, seems to have been the recipient of the revelation of this 'mystery'—the Church. . . . When did the Church come into Being? . . . The Church was born on the day of Pentecost. It did not exist before that time.' Cf. also 84:11, 158 f., 167 f., 'The Rapture of the Church.'

118. *Minutes*, 1930, 11; 1945, 130; 1949, 13 f. *RPA*. 81:5 (May, 1947), 126.

“Old Lights.” But now, the “Old Lights” are four and a half times larger than we, and the “Old Lights” themselves have steadily declined. We need not go on to tell that we are small and grow smaller almost by the hour. These are signs of the times of our church. . . . We have schooled ourselves in the traditional language of optimism until we have lost the will to improve, and the willingness to recognize our sins. The truth is our church is in a desperate need of a revival or we will die. . . . There is nothing in our size that decrees we must die. There is nothing in our Presbyterian position that prevents life and growth. There is no obstacle confronting us, individually or collectively, that will drag us down to defeat. But unless we repent from our sins, and return to God in a revival, then there is every sign that our times are at an end.’

A Changed Church

As we look back over the history of the General Synod, many observations could be made. However, at this juncture we may be permitted to limit ourselves to the mention of two.

First, we note that this history is, as has been said, the story of abandoning Covenanter distinctives.¹²⁰ The Reformed Presbyterian Church, General Synod, in the 1950’s is no longer the Covenanter Church of the early 1800’s. It is no longer a distinctively Reformed Presbyterian church in the old traditional sense of the name. With a view to union with another Presbyterian body, this change was formalized by the General Synod in 1959, exactly 150 years from its initial organization in 1809, with the dropping of *Reformation Principles Exhibited* as a subordinate standard.¹²¹

119. *Minutes*, 1953, 10 f. These are the words of Samuel S. Ward. Cf. B. C. and J. W. George, *Church History* (Part One), 1969?, 33: ‘The Church was on its deathbed.’ It was ‘a weak and dwindling organization’ (32).

120. Clark, 83. Cf. George, 32: ‘Indeed, the distinctives had been lost during the twentieth century.’

121. In 1955 the Pittsburgh Presbytery demanded that either the publication *Reformation Principles Exhibited* be made available to the churches, or else no longer included in the ordination questions. The matter came up again in 1956 when the Committee on the Book of Discipline inquired: ‘Is General Synod willing to delete *Reformation Principles Exhibited* as a doctrinal standard of our church? If we do, will we thereby cease to be Reformed Presbyterian and therefore will there be changes in some of our finances and charters of Boards, etc. Synod is at the crossroads here and must decide.’ Synod’s decision was finally

Second, one could not fail to notice the decline of the Church, both in vitality and numbers, during this 150-year period. The discouraged church of the 1950's was certainly not the optimistic church of the early 1800's. This leads us to consider the reasons for this decline. Many reasons both could, and have, been given. Very prominent among them is the conviction that the abandonment of Covenanter distinctives and the decline of the Church go hand in hand. In other words, the disregard of distinctives led to the downfall of the Church. As early as 1888, this explanation is self-evident to the Old Light minister W. M. Glasgow: 'The obvious reason for their [*i.e.*, the General Synod's] marvelous declension is that they have no distinct ground on which to stand.'¹²²

This is also the approach of the most recent writer on the subject, N. E. Clark. Other causes of decline are admitted such as the fact that pressures without the Church drew the young people away, and that the Covenanter tradition was not welcome in America's materialistic society. However, none of these are the major factor. Speaking of the division of 1868, Clark observes: 'In the ensuing years such distinctive issues were avoided, evaded, unexplained, and undisciplined, with the futile hope that the church would be at peace and grow. It was precisely this attitude, however, more than the split itself, which led to the long-range decline of the church.'¹²³

registered in 1959 when by unanimous consent it was declared: 'We are happy to note that our Fraternal Relations Committee took the initiative in making Reformation Principles exhibited a document reflecting our great heritage rather than a subordinate standard.' *Minutes*, 1955, 9; 1956, 45; 1959, 31.

122. Glasgow, 103.

123. Clark, 64. *Cf.* 77 f.: 'From the testimony of the members who lived through those years, it would seem that pressures from outside the church drew the young people away, and the Covenanter tradition of the church simply was not welcome in the society of American materialism. At first glance, this would appear to be reason enough for decline, and although it probably was the immediate cause there is little evidence that it was the sole underlying reason. Liberal critics often claim that it was the church's exclusiveness and its inability or unwillingness to cooperate with modernistic and liberal theological trends that led to its decadence. Again, there is no evidence for this. The only alternative is the possibility of doctrinal weakness inherent in the church—an unexplained abandon-

The matter of the loss of distinctive principles, along with other factors, is also stressed by Charles Holliday in a report on evangelism to the Synod of 1954. However, this is but a surface explanation; it does not get to the heart of the matter. 'The greatest loss both spiritually and numerically has come through the disregard and utter lack of concern for the Great Commission; or, putting it in the words of this report — "Evangelism."¹²⁴

Perhaps it would be fitting to close this chapter with the observation of R. W. Chesnut, who was, until his death in 1953, the patriarch of the General Synod. No other man of his time was so intimately acquainted with its history. His *Historical Sketch* published in 1945 dwells upon the reasons for the decline of the Church.¹²⁵

First to be mentioned is the wave of emigration to the west after the Civil War which drew many away from the eastern churches. These failed to build up the Church in the west, since economic motives often precluded their settling together for that purpose. However, even so, where there were congregations which stuck together, there was often great difficulty in obtaining a pastor. This, as well as the shortage of ministers in the Church in general, is to be explained by the unwillingness of young men to sacrifice more refined ways of living for the opportunity of building up the flock of God in poor and difficult circumstances. As Chesnut wrote in his *Autobiography*: 'Lack of a faithful ministry and proper Presbyterian oversight has ruined the work of many faithful congregations.' Again, many ministers have not been true to their Master or to the denomination they promised to serve. They have neglected its Reformation Principles and the necessity of crying aloud and sparing not the common and special sins of the day. Others have used poor judgment and

ing of tenets previously sustained with unrelenting firmness and the absence of anything to fill the theological gap.' Cf. also George, 32.

124. *Minutes*, 1954, 15.

125. Chesnut, *Sketch*, 37 f., 77, 90 ff., *et al.*

wrought havoc wherever they have gone. Having a good education, they thought they were pious, but lacked good sense. Some thought themselves too well educated to sacrifice their talents to build up small churches and a small denomination.¹²⁶ Then there was the cessation of foreign immigration from Scotland and Ireland.

When our Synod was first organized and for many years afterward, the growth of the churches was almost entirely from foreign immigration. . . . There was more attention given to these Christian immigrants, than to those who were careless, indifferent, or possibly unbelievers. . . . So long as this influx of Christian people kept coming in from abroad, the churches grew. The unsaved were largely neglected. . . . Our ministers while pretty well educated, were not trained to go out and build up the church from the raw material of the world. As long as they could go down to the wharf when the ship came in from Scotland or Ireland, loaded with fresh recruits, the work was prosperous. . . . The harvest was indeed plentiful, and the laborers few; but even worse, the laborers did not know how to do the work after being so long simply housing those who had already been used to the work of the church and were simply waiting for a church home and an opportunity for service.¹²⁷

There has been also a lack of faithful support, financial and otherwise, for the organizations of the Church—whether synod, synodical boards, presbyteries, or congregations. Indeed, there were more organizations than could be supported. ‘In looking over the failures of the past in the history of our denomination, we discover many things that were well planned but poorly executed. Our failures have not been in the planning, so much, as in their execution.’¹²⁸

Finally, the most damaging hindrance to the work of the Church has been the church union craze.

The Union craze has been the cause of more trouble in the churches than any other cause we have mentioned. . . . It was the Union craze that started the trouble in 1868, and again in 1870, and still later in 1905. In all these cases the attempt to force the people to act without sufficient time for consideration was the cause of trouble and dissen-

126. *Ibid.*, 90-92; *Autobiography*, 45. The old Covenanter suspicion of ministers comes out in these observations. Chesnut, himself, though a Ph.D., labored all his life to build up small rural churches.

127. *Ibid.*, 37, 91.

128. *Ibid.*, 54, 92.

sion. Not so much because union was not desired, as that scheming and trickery among the leaders was evident. So far at least all attempts at union have been a failure to bring about a harmonious union. We have all these years been trying to bring about the union of Ps. and A.P.s, and R.P.s and U.P.s, but in every case we have produced nothing but Split Ps. Not in a single instance have we produced a better and more prolific variety.

It is the opinion of the writer that if all these varieties of Ps, were united and cultivated by our stock of amateur theological leaders, we would soon be like the church of the Laodiceans, fit only to be spewed out of the mouth of the Lord. In union there will be strength, if we the constituent elements of the united church, led by the Holy Spirit, live, believe and act in harmony.¹²⁹

The General Synod as a denomination has been, like many others, barren, bearing little or no fruit for the Kingdom. Yet there is a better spirit of unity in the Reformed Presbyterian Church than in the past. ‘The present is a day of opportunity such as we have never had in all our history as a denomination. The way is clear; the door stands ajar; are we ready and willing to enter and go forward?’¹³⁰

Perhaps this forward movement would involve a better and more prolific variety of a united church led by the Holy Spirit in harmony of conviction and action!

129. *Ibid.*, 93.

130. *Ibid.*, 44 f, 59.