

**C. J&R: An Idea is Born and Brought to Fruition** – Representatives of the closest conservative Presbyterian churches – the OPC, the RPCES, the RPCNA, and the PCA – continued formal and informal contacts in the later 1970s. Very few if any substantive differences separated them, although history and personality/style differences remained obstacles and all knew that with negotiated merger plans, “the devil was in the details.” A turning point was reached at Covenant College, when representatives of the four churches’ ecumenical committees met on September 13-14, 1979. The PCA, being so young as a denomination, had actually been urged by some at its General Assembly earlier that year not to consider any merger plan for at least five more years, or 1984. When Edmund Clowney of the OPC suggested on the first day that a way around this PCA reluctance would be for individual churches or even denominations to simply join the PCA, since it was by far the largest of the four bodies, the idea was seized on by Donald MacNair of the RPCES committee the next day and he made a proposal that the PCA consider extending such receiving invitations in the future. The PCA’s 8th Assembly, meeting in Savannah, GA, voted on June 17, 1980, 525 to 38, to issue those invitations to the three other denominations.

The RPCNA soon dropped out of consideration (their adherence to exclusive psalm-singing, among other distinctives, was still too much of an obstacle) and the PCA presbyteries voted by the spring of 1981 not to approve the invitation to the OPC (a narrow decision – 75% of the 25 presbyteries were needed to vote yes; only 18 of them approved. One of them defeated the invitation by only two votes, so it could be said those two votes had effectively closed the door to the OPC). The plan came to be known as J&R – the RPCES was committing itself to join the PCA as it was without any negotiated concessions or formal adoption of any RPCES distinctives, and the PCA was committing itself to receive the officers and congregations of the joining church without any examinations or evaluations...a significant display of trust by each church. This J&R plan was used to enable the churches, leaders, and members of the RPCES to join and be received by the PCA during their overlapping annual meetings in June, 1982 in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The final votes were taken with these results: leading up to the assemblies over 75% of the PCA presbyteries had approved the reception of the RPCES, and on June 12, the RPCES Synod approved the plan for it to join the PCA, 322-90 (78+%). J&R was officially consummated at the opening of the PCA Assembly in Grand Rapids, June 14, 1982.

**IV. Relations since 1982** – In the aftermath of the successful result of the J&R process, there was one more attempt to extend its use for the greater unity of the church. The PCA voted at its very next assembly in 1983 to send to its presbyteries a plan to extend a new invitation to the OPC. Twenty-nine of the thirty-seven PCA presbyteries (78%) approved the plan, achieving the 75% that was required. The OPC presented the invitation to its assembly, which agreed to put the plan to a vote at the assembly in 1986. The occasion was not without other significance – that would be the year of the OPC’s celebration of its 50th anniversary. At that time the OPC commissioners approved the plan 76 to 68, but this result was 20 votes short of the two-thirds needed to pass. Though there would be subsequent communications over the years, the two churches retrenched in positions that reinforced their separation: the PCA preferred to stick with the J&R approach whenever representatives from the two churches discussed possibilities for getting together, while the OPC returned to its preference for a truly negotiated merger. As the century finished, such discussions no longer reflected the same sense of urgency there had been in the 1970s. Into the early years of the twentieth century, NAPARC continues with a lengthening roster of member denominations, but many delegates and observers acknowledge that interchurch relations among conservative Presbyterian and Reformed churches have cooled to a level of civility and fraternity that is not marked by deep convictions about the need to improve the experience of the unity of the greater church.

See [www.pcahistory.org/pca/jandr/reports.html](http://www.pcahistory.org/pca/jandr/reports.html) for information reports issued leading up to the J&R.

## An Introduction to Ecumenical Relations Among American Conservative Presbyterians in the 20th Century By Dr. Bill Johnson

The 20th century has sometimes been called the ecumenical century, largely because the so-called ecumenical movement flourished then as it ran its course from beginning (at the Edinburgh Missions Conference in 1910), to the major step forward (the creation of the World Council of Churches in 1948), to a sort of climax sometime in the 1960s or 1970s. This movement in the United States enlisted mostly mainline Protestant churches, some Orthodox communions, and finally the Roman Catholic Church, at least as a partner in dialogue. Meanwhile, conservative Presbyterian denominations were moving from defensive suspicion to cautious exploration of ecumenical possibilities among themselves and other Reformed bodies. This article traces the outline and significant events of conservative American Presbyterian ecumenicity in the 20th century; originally intended for a primarily-PCA audience, it emphasizes the forerunners and experience of the PCA. Because of limitations of space, it can make only fleeting references to the many efforts among conservative churches of Dutch and German Reformed origins to also pursue ecumenical relations and how these various Reformed branches interacted.

### I. Sorting Things Out

**A. The Players** - As the main, largest Presbyterian denominations in the US – the Northern church (PCUSA) and the Southern church (the PCUS) – were trending in liberal directions in the early and mid-20th century (the Northern church went liberal faster and earlier than the Southern), they were also becoming involved in the accelerating mainline ecumenical movement. As evangelicals in these two bodies grew increasingly alarmed at the trends towards liberalism, they would eventually create conservative breakaway movements, first in the North, then later in the South. Besides there being evangelicals in these two largest churches, there were several thoroughly conservative Presbyterian denominations at the start of the 20th century. The largest of these was the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, strongest in the South and known for its college and seminary, both named Erskine, in South Carolina. Also larger, the “old” United Presbyterian Church began the century as a fairly conservative body, but slowly trended in a liberal direction and in 1958 merged with the large Northern church. Two very small denominations, both descended from Scottish Covenanter origins, were the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America, also known as “Old Light” Covenanters (with its own seminary in Pittsburgh and a college in Beaver Falls, PA, Geneva), and the Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America, General Synod, also known as “New Light” Covenanters (with a college for a time in Cedarville, OH). Their division dated from 1833.

**B. Disruptions in the North** - Stirred in part by the Fundamentalist vs. Modernist turmoil of the 1910-1930 period (and beyond), some conservative Northern Presbyterians tried to resist the liberalizing trends, which showed up most strongly in missions, seminary education, and doctrinal pronouncements at various annual assemblies in the 1920s and early 1930s. Led by J. Gresham Machen, they founded first their own seminary, Westminster in Philadelphia (1929), and then an independent missions board (1933). For the latter effort, Machen and some other ministers were stripped of their Northern Presbyterian ordinations in 1935. (1.) Machen and a small group of ministers [33 others], ruling elders [17], and 79 non-ordained laymen left the Northern Church and founded the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in 1936. Before that year ended, 75 ministers were under its jurisdiction and a number of churches had joined or formed to join. (2.) Sadly, due in part to the untimely death of Machen on Jan. 1, 1937, at the age of 55 some diversity in the small denomination was revealed and tensions erupted in 1937 that led to the bitter departure of a minority group (14 ministers and 3 ruling elders) which soon founded Faith Seminary (1937) and the Bible Presbyterian Church (“BP,” 1938).

(3.) Carl McIntire developed into a rather heavy-handed, almost dictatorial leader in the BP denomination and some of his colleagues like Buswell and Harris and younger men, most notably Donald MacNair and Robert Rayburn, began resisting this trend. Tensions came to a head in 1955, when the entire BP Church numbered about 8,760 members (the OPC was about the same size at this time). About 43% of the church followed McIntire in leaving and they formed what came to be known as the BP Church, Collingswood (NJ) Synod; the majority remained in what was initially known as the BP Church, Columbus (OH) Synod, and then changed their name in 1961 to the Evangelical Presbyterian Church to avoid confusion with the McIntire group, which became the ongoing Bible Presbyterian Church.

## II. The Background of Early Ecumenical Efforts

**A. Theological Leaders and Isolated Southerners** - The Old Light Covenanters, the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America, were the early leaders among conservative Presbyterians in developing and maintaining a theology and practice of ecumenical cooperation. In 1871, continuing the covenanting tradition of their Scottish forbears, this church produced “The Covenant,” later to be known as “The Covenant of 1871.” One of its principle paragraphs is a remarkable presentation of the doctrine of the unity of the church that commits the denomination to work toward a more “visible oneness in the church.” Many experiences of members of this denomination in cooperative ministries with Christians from other churches led them to collect its various “Deliverances of the Reformed Presbyterian Synod on Cooperation in Voluntary Societies (1898). The potential influence of this denomination among other conservative Presbyterians was perhaps undercut by its adherence to exclusive psalm-singing in its worship. Meanwhile the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church remained largely isolated in the South, though they had some cooperation with the somewhat conservative and largely southern PCUS.

**B. OPC Efforts** - In part because the Orthodox Presbyterian Church was a bit older and more stable than either eventual branch of the Bible Presbyterian churches, they seemed to have more energy for ecumenical (“fraternal” was a term that came into use among these churches) relations with other Reformed and Presbyterian bodies. They discussed closer relations and began discussing merger possibilities with the Christian Reformed Church (CRC), the largest of the conservative Dutch Reformed churches in the US, but nothing ultimately came of these efforts. They also pursued merger discussions in the early 1950s with the Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America, General Synod denomination (the “New Light” group). Nothing came of this effort, either. But scholar-teachers in the OPC like R. B. Kuiper, John Murray, Ned Stonehouse, and later Edmund Clowney, produced some of the most influential writings urging Reformed and Presbyterian churches to be more aware of their unity and calling for a more aggressive response to what some began to refer to as the “ecumenical imperative” of Scripture. Unlike the mainline ecumenical movement, however, conservative Presbyterian and Reformed churches have always believed that doctrinal, confessional unity had to be the foundation of any merger discussions.

**C. EPC Helps Produce a First Merger** - In 1961, barely six years after their loss of the McIntire faction, the newly-renamed Evangelical Presbyterian Church expanded fraternal relations with the Reformed Presbyterian Church, General Synod (RPC, GS). This Covenanter church, (the “New Light” group) had fewer barriers to merger discussions because unlike their “Old Light” cousins, they had given up exclusive Psalm-singing in worship. They were very small and not growing much, so were eager to join others. Among their leaders were Franklin Dyrness, Richard Gray, and Charles Holliday. Just four years later, the two churches merged (1965). The ceremony of union took place at their concurrent annual synods at Covenant College on April 6, 1965, and the newly-constituted church became the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod. Covenant College and Covenant Seminary remained as institutions of the expanded denomination.

**D. OPC & RPCES Come Close** - Surprisingly soon after the formation of the RPCES, some of its leaders and

some leaders from the OPC began pressing for closer ties between the two groups. The fraternal relations committees of the two denominations began serious discussions and by 1970 the start of a merger plan was being circulated. The plan was not without its obstacles - after all it had only been a little over 30 years since the grievous split of 1937 and veterans in both groups had not forgotten the hard feelings and disagreements of that time. The BP-EP-RPCES group had grown at a more rapid rate than the OPC and they feared that a merger would cause the church to lose growth momentum. The OPC was not as diverse as the RPCES and was used to a more deliberative assembly style and perhaps a closer adherence to traditional Presbyterian theology and church practice. But both groups agreed to bring the merger plan to a vote. This action was done in early June, 1975, while the annual assemblies met concurrently at Geneva College in Beaver Falls (near Pittsburgh), PA. In a reverse of what many expected, the OPC approved the merger with slightly more than the 2/3 vote required, but the RPCES failed to sufficiently approve it by only 122 votes. Ten years of work seemed to have ended to no avail - or had it?

## III. Lead-up to J&R

**A. The PCA Enters the Scene When Disruption Comes to the South** - The Presbyterian Church in America was officially formed in December of 1973 when about 250 congregations representing about 55,000 members left the Southern Presbyterian Church (PCUS). This formation culminated a number of years of struggle as the larger denomination became progressively liberal. Showing how the conservatives continued to be concerned about the unbiblical foundation of the mainstream ecumenical movement, one of the issues that drove the conservatives out of the PCUS was that denomination's continuing discussion of merger plans with the large and even more liberal Northern Presbyterian Church (PCUSA), which merger would finally happen in 1983, just one year after J&R.

**B. Two Organizations Provide Ways for the Denominations to Network** - When the future leaders of the PCA were still planning for their exodus from the PCUS, they often had contact with and encouragement from leaders in the RPCES, the OPC, and the RPCNA. These contacts and continuing turmoil in the larger and liberal denominations led to the founding of successive organizations which served all the conservative Presbyterians as ways to keep networking and building cooperation and unity. The first, the National Presbyterian and Reformed Fellowship (NPRF), was founded in 1971 and counted among its leaders Aiken Taylor of the Presbyterian Journal and Donald Graham, its first executive director. Membership was open to ministers, ruling elders, and other interested laymen rather than to denominations. Then in 1975 the North America Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC) was formed. It was a more formal organization than the NPRF in that denominations were members - initially, the RPCES, the OPC, the RPCNA, the PCA, and the CRC (Christian Reformed Church). The former group eventually disbanded in the early 1980's; the latter group continues still and has been joined by some other Presbyterian and Reformed denominations, including the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church.

