

Southern Presbyterian Ecumenism: The PCUS–RCA Merger Plan, Northern Reunion, and the Formation of the PCA

By Zachary M. Garris

American Presbyterian history is full of church splits and church mergers, but it is also full of *failed* mergers. Stories of such leave us wondering what might have been. One notable example can be found in the 1982 Joining and Receiving between the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) and the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod (RPCES). What is not always told is that the PCA had also invited the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) to consider a merger, and the OPC General Assembly even voted to join the two bodies on June 3, 1981. However, when this merger went to the PCA presbyteries, they only approved the receiving of the RPCES, resulting in a two-way merger¹ without the OPC. The PCA invited the OPC to join again in 1986, but the OPC declined.

Even lesser known is the failed merger in 1968 between the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS)—from which the PCA seceded—and the Reformed Church in America (RCA), a major Dutch Reformed denomination. After several years of discussions and a proposed Plan of Union, the PCUS passed the Plan at the presbytery level, but it was then rejected by the RCA at the classis level. As the RCA later grew increasingly liberal, some of its conservative churches joined the PCA in the 2010s, showing the possibility for the Presbyterian and Dutch Reformed traditions to come together.

This essay will explore the background to the failed Plan of Union between the PCUS and RCA in the 1960s, focusing on the rise of liberalism (modernism) and ecumenism in the PCUS in the 20th century. It will then show how RCA's rejection of the PCUS merger plan set in motion events that led to the formation of the PCA in 1973, followed by the 1983 union between the Southern PCUS and the Northern PCUSA. The essay will conclude with reflections on Southern Presbyterian ecumenism.

INTRODUCTION

Successful Presbyterian Mergers

Successful church unions have often been reunifications of earlier splits. This was the case for two of the most prominent mergers, the unification of Old School and New School factions in the South and then in the North. The Old School–New School churches divided in 1837–38, and then these two churches split geographically to form four different Presbyterian churches—the New School splitting into Northern and Southern churches in 1857 because of differences over slavery, and the Old School splitting into Northern and Southern churches after the Southern states seceded from the Union in 1861.

Thus, replacing the theological divide of Old School and New School was the geographical divide of North and South. In 1864, the Southern New School (United Synod of the South) joined the Southern Old School church (Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America). After the Civil War ended, it changed its name to the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS), or what is often known as the Southern Presbyterian Church. In 1869, the Northern New School also joined the Northern Old School Church (Presbyterian Church in the United States of America).

This meant that for over a century—from 1869 until 1983—there was essentially a Northern Presbyterian

THE AUTHOR: Zachary M. Garris serves as pastor of Bryce Avenue Presbyterian Church (PCA) in White Rock, New Mexico. He holds a Master of Divinity from Reformed Theological Seminary (Jackson) and a Juris Doctor from Wayne State University Law School. He is the author of *Masculine Christianity* and editor of *Dabney on Fire*. He writes at KnowingScripture.com.

1. While “merger” is not technically what was proposed and a “joining a receiving” is more unilateral than a merger, we use “merger” here to denote a coming together of two or more institutions.

Church (PCUSA/UPCUSA) and a Southern Presbyterian Church (PCUS). These two churches finally merged in 1983 to form the PCUSA, a national mainline church. (The merger was specifically between the PCUS and the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (UPCUSA), the latter being a 1958 merger of the PCUSA and the United Presbyterian Church of North America (UPCNA), which came out of the Associate Presbytery tradition.) Yet there is much backstory to this reunion between North and South, as it did not take place until the two churches had already experienced departures. A few conservative churches left the Northern PCUSA in 1929 to form the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC), and many conservative churches left the Southern PCUS in 1973 to form the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA).

Southern Presbyterians and the Dutch Reformed

All of this can be head-scratching for the newcomer to Presbyterian history. But one thing that should be emphasized is the above mergers were between two *Presbyterian* bodies. Yet prior to the unification to form the PCUSA in 1983, as well as the secession to form the PCA in 1973, was an attempted merger in the 1960s between a Presbyterian body (the PCUS) and a Dutch Reformed church, the Reformed Church in America (RCA). This is one of those “what if” moments in church history, as these were two major denominations of different theological heritage.

While both churches trace their lineage back to the Reformed branch of the Reformation, they originate from two different countries, Scotland and the Netherlands. Ministers of Presbyterian persuasion had come

to the colonies in the early 17th century, but the first presbytery was not established in America until 1706 by the Scots-Irish minister Francis Makemie (1658–1708). Meanwhile, the first Dutch Reformed church had been established in New Amsterdam (now New York City) in 1628, and a Dutch assembly became independent from the classis of Amsterdam in 1754. (A classis is relatively equivalent to a presbytery.) The first General Synod was held in 1794, and the church adopted the name Reformed Church in America in 1867. However, a group of four churches had left in 1857 to form what would become known as the Christian Reformed Church (the name was not used until 1904), with others leaving the RCA to join the CRC in 1882.²

The Presbyterians and Dutch Reformed also come from different confessional traditions, with American Presbyterians subscribing to the Westminster Confession and Catechisms (American modifications in 1787–88) and the Dutch Reformed subscribing to the Three Forms of Unity (Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, Canons of Dort). While similar in theology, the Westminster Confession and Catechisms (approved and accepted by Church of Scotland 1647) built on the Irish Articles (1615) and the Three Forms of Unity (1561, 1563, 1618–19, respectively) and thus represent a more mature development in post-Reformation Reformed orthodoxy.³

American Presbyterians had come into contact with the Dutch Reformed through missionary work, and “During the mid-1840s, new school, old school, and both associate strands organized small Dutch Presbyterian congregations from western New York to Wisconsin.” One example comes from the 1850s, when Old School Presbyterians sent Jacob Schepers, a missionary born in the Netherlands, to organize a Dutch church in Lafayette, Indiana.⁴ Yet despite such interactions, on the surface it is hard to see how such a merger between the PCUS and RCA would have succeeded. Although sister churches in the Reformed tradition, the Presbyterians and Dutch Reformed represent not only two different confessional traditions, but two different peoples. The Dutch Reformed have their own peculiarities, making them a unique subculture in America. Many Presbyterians in America, especially in the early period, were of Scottish and Scots-Irish origin. In the case of the PCUS, it was particularly the *Southern* Presbyterian Church, with its roots in the Confederacy and the secession of the Southern states in 1860–61 (hence the original name, the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America). This Southern identity adds further contrast with the Dutch Reformed, who were mostly

2. Cornelis Pronk, *A Goodly Heritage: The Secession of 1834 and Its Impact on Reformed Churches in the Netherlands and North America* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019), pp. 335, 337.

3. Richard Muller divides the post-Reformation development of Protestantism into three periods of early, high, and late orthodoxy. Early orthodoxy had two phases (ca. 1565–1618–1640). It began with the death of most “second-generation codifiers of the Reformed faith” (Calvin, Musculus, Vermigli, Hyperius) and “was the era of the confessional solidification of Protestantism.” High orthodoxy (ca. 1640–1685–1725) also had two phases, and it “represents a still broader theological synthesis than early orthodoxy.” Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 2nd ed., 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 1:30–32. Thus, the Three Forms of Unity fall under the period of early orthodoxy, while the Westminster Standards fall under high orthodoxy.

4. Richard H. Harms, “The Other Reformed: Dutch Presbyterians in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 42/1 (April 2007): 35.

concentrated outside of the South, with major pockets of churches in New York, Michigan, Iowa, and California. Yet as hard as it may be to wonder how such a merger between a Dutch Reformed church and the Southern Presbyterian Church would work, they did have a plan. Although the differences between the two churches were great, for many the drive for Protestant unity was high and concern for theological distinctives was low.

ECUMENISM IN THE PCUS

Ecumenism and Liberalism in the 20th-Century PCUS

After the Civil War ended in 1865, the PCUS had firmly rejected any notion of reunion with the Northern Church, which comes as no surprise. Not only did the Northern Church demand loyalty to the Union in its 1861 Gardiner Spring Resolutions, but it inflamed the issue in 1865 when the Northern Church (prior to its merger with the Northern New School) issued “orders” that the Southern Church renounce its errors of rebellion, slavery, and states’ rights. This was in addition to resentment over the war’s devastation in the South and the subsequent Reconstruction period.

Yet as time passed and new generations arose, the PCUS began to consider mergers with other churches, with the ultimate goal being reunion with the Northern Presbyterian Church. As the PCUS entered the 20th century, a spirit of ecumenism was in the air, peaking after the end of World War II in 1945. The nationalism that accompanied two world wars surely aided the desire for church unity in America. However, this ecumenical spirit cannot be disconnected from the coinciding rise in theological liberalism (modernism) in the PCUS in the 20th century, as doctrinal laxity opened the door to an emphasis on church unity at the expense of theological orthodoxy. Protestant ecumenism was part of the social gospel that sought to improve public order in America, where theology and confessionalism became secondary.⁵ Modernism sought to accommodate culture, and the coinciding ecumenism (what some had called “broad churchism”) sought to water down the church’s doctrine in hopes of leading to greater visible unity.

A noticeable shift took place in the PCUS in the 1930s. Yet this was the culmination of liberalizing elements in the PCUS even in the late 19th century. When theologian R. L. Dabney (1820–1898) left Union Theological Seminary (Virginia) for Texas in 1883, Walter W. Moore (1857–1926) joined Union’s faculty as an adjunct professor of Hebrew. Moore, who became president of the seminary in 1904, was himself theologically

conservative. However, he was willing to allow a looser “system subscription” to the Westminster Standards that undermined such conservatism. As Moore stated to A. J. McKelway, editor of the *Presbyterian Standard*, “We must have more liberty in our Church or there is going to be an explosion....In my judgment there is nothing more certain as to the future of our Church than that we must allow a subscription to the ‘system of doctrine,’ without trying to tie men down in every statement of detail.”⁶

Conservatives in the PCUS failed to take seriously and respond to the liberalizing theology advanced by men such as James I. Vance, A. J. McKelway, and Walter L. Lingle in the early 20th century.⁷ Even by the time of the 1906 General Assembly, the editor of the *Central Presbyterian* acknowledged that “it was clearly evident that there were two distinct parties” at the Assembly, one of which formed a “liberal’ element” in the church.⁸ As the PCUS moved into the 1920s, this liberal group was much larger than conservatives in the PCUS were aware (Lucas, p. 39). By 1931, William Marcellus McPheeters (1854–1935), a professor of Old Testament at Columbia Seminary who had studied under Dabney at Union, said, “I am persuaded that we are on the verge, either of becoming what is called an inclusive church, which in my judgment is no church at all, or on the verge of testing by judicial process the reality of our church’s allegiance to its own record.”⁹

5. D. G. Hart, “The Tie that Divides: Presbyterian Ecumenism, Fundamentalism, and the History of the Twentieth-Century American Protestantism,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 60 (1998): 91–92.

6. W. W. Moore to A. J. McKelway, n.d., in J. Gray McAllister, *The Life and Letters of Walter W. Moore* (Richmond, VA: Union Theological Seminary, 1939), p. 208.

7. See Sean Michael Lucas, *For a Continuing Church: The Roots of the Presbyterian Church in America* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015), pp. 12–38.

8. “Our Assembly’s Letter,” *Central Presbyterian* (May 30, 1906): 344, quoted in Ernest Trice Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South: Volume 3: 1890–1972* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1973), p. 224. The 1906 General Assembly overturned the Synod of Texas’s annulment of the Fort Worth Presbytery receiving Rev. William Caldwell, a University of Chicago PhD who rejected the historicity of the early chapters of Genesis. The synod instructed the presbytery to investigate Caldwell’s views, and while the presbytery found his views unsatisfactory, it declined to bring charges. Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, 3:303–305.

9. W. M. McPheeters to A. M. Fraser, March 7, 1931, J. McDowell Richards Papers, Box 80, Presbyterian Historical Society, Montreat, North Carolina, quoted in Sean Michael Lucas, “Our Church Will Be On Trial’: W. M. McPheeters and the Beginnings of Conservative Dissent in the Presbyterian Church in the United States,” *The Journal of Presbyterian History* 84/1 (Spring/Summer 2006): 52.

Liberal Procedural Victory in the PCUS

Two famous cases evidence the PCUS's shift into theological liberalism in the 20th century. The first is the case of Hay Watson Smith (1868–1940), whom the Arkansas Presbytery received as a minister in 1912 even though he read a paper to the presbytery stating he embraced the theory of evolution and denied biblical inerrancy (Lucas, pp. 69–70). In 1923, Smith published a 115-page pamphlet, *Evolutionism and Presbyterianism*, that said the Bible “is inspired, but it is not inerrant,” claimed the doctrinal system of Calvinism was “static and obsolescent,” and called for affirmation of evolution and “the modernization of some parts of our theology.”¹⁰ After Smith published three other pamphlets, Augusta Presbytery overtured the General Assembly in 1929 to investigate Smith's views regarding evolution. W. M. McPheeters, the conservative Columbia Seminary professor, offered a substitute motion to instruct Arkansas Presbytery to investigate Smith's theology, broadening the scope beyond evolution. However, the Arkansas Presbytery's commission in 1930 focused on Smith's 1912 statement and ruled that his views were insufficient to disqualify him as a minister. Eventually an appeal led the Synod of Arkansas in 1931 to instruct the Arkansas Presbytery to reinvestigate Smith, but the presbytery did not follow the synod's instructions and instead adopted a resolution that affirmed its 1930 commission report. A complaint came before the judicial commission of the 1933 General Assembly, which sustained the decisions of the presbytery and synod and denied the complaint (Lucas, pp. 72–77).

In protecting Smith via procedural methods, this was a watershed case that opened the door for others to

10. Hay Watson Smith, *Evolutionism and Presbyterianism* (Little Rock, AR: Allsopp and Chapple, 1923), pp. 29, 75, 81.

11. Morton H. Smith, *How Is the Gold Become Dim*, 3rd ed. (Greenville, SC: Southern Presbyterian Press, 1973), p. 85. Smith was commissioned by the Steering Committee of the Continuing Presbyterian Church (which formed the PCA in 1973) to write this book as a justification for their separation from the PCUS.

12. *Minutes of the PCUS Assembly* (1967), pp. 147–148, quoted in Smith, *How Is the Gold Become Dim*, p. 89. Thompson agreed with this assessment, saying, “In the 1920's the Southern Presbyterian Church remained predominantly conservative.” Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, p. 486.

13. For an account of McPheeters and both the Smith and Thompson cases, see also Lucas, “Our Church Will Be On Trial”: W. M. McPheeters and the Beginnings of Conservative Dissent in the Presbyterian Church in the United States,” *The Journal of Presbyterian History* 84/1 (Spring/Summer 2006): 52–66.

14. E. T. Thompson to Tom Glasgow, July 4, 1940, Thompson Papers, Union Presbyterian Theological Seminary, quoted in Lucas, *For a Continuing Church*, p. 88.

hold liberal views more freely in the PCUS. However, it should be noted that at the 1966 General Assembly this procedural principle also protected conservative ministers from discipline for starting Reformed Theological Seminary (RTS) in Jackson, Mississippi.¹¹ RTS was started in response to the decline of the PCUS and its seminaries, as conservative efforts to revitalize Columbia Seminary in Decatur, Georgia failed (where W. M. McPheeters and W. C. Robinson taught). As the RTS catalogue stated, “As recently as the 1930's the theological position of American Presbyterianism in the South was generally uniform,” citing its distinctives as “The inerrancy of the Bible, the pure Calvinism of the Westminster Standards, jure divino view of Presbyterian polity, the spirituality of the Church.” The catalogue added, “A movement away from these distinctives began around the year 1935,” which was shortly after the conclusion of the Smith case.¹²

The second case evidencing the rise of theological liberalism in the PCUS is that of Ernest Trice Thompson (1894–1985), noted author and much loved professor of church history at Union Theological Seminary (Virginia), who was said to have taught over half the ministers of the PCUS by the time of his retirement (Smith, p. 86). W. M. McPheeters was again at work, having a written exchange with Thompson in 1928–29 where he criticized Thompson for modernist views that undermined the inerrancy of Scripture. Thompson then defended the Auburn Affirmation (1924), of the Northern Church, which led to criticism from John M. Wells in the *Presbyterian Standard*, and led McPheeters to contact the president of Union Seminary, B. R. Lacy, along with four seminary trustees in 1932. Yet the Union board found nothing in Thompson's writings worthy of adjudication (Lucas, pp. 79–83).¹³

McPheeters died in 1935, but his nephew, Tom Glasgow, a ruling elder from Charlotte, North Carolina, took up the cause. At the 1940 General Assembly, Glasgow sought to convince the Assembly to establish a committee to investigate the teaching of the four PCUS seminaries (Columbia, Union, Louisville, Austin), with a focus on biblical inspiration. Glasgow even had a meeting with Union president B. R. Lacy in Charlotte in which Lacy defended Thompson (Lucas, pp. 84–87). In correspondence with Glasgow, Thompson stated that anyone informed of the variations within Bible manuscripts “will have to admit the possibility of errors in the only Bibles that we possess.”¹⁴ Both Lacy and Thompson emphasized Glasgow's right to bring charges against Thompson in the appropriate judicatory. Glasgow hoped a minister in Thompson's presbytery

would come forward to lead the case, but when that did not happen, Glasgow published and distributed a pamphlet in 1940 attacking Thomson's orthodoxy.¹⁵ The Synod of Appalachia requested that Union Seminary investigate Thompson, and several presbyteries overtured the General Assembly to examine Thompson's theology (Concord, Florida, and Mississippi presbyteries) and to examine the theology of the seminaries (Mecklenburg Presbytery). Oddly, Thompson himself even requested his presbytery and Union's board investigate his theology.

However, East Hanover Presbytery, of which Thompson was a member, exonerated him in November 1940, and Union Seminary's board adopted a statement in February 1941 that affirmed Thompson's orthodoxy. The 1941 Assembly referred the overtures on Thompson and the seminaries to the committee on theological seminaries, and the majority of the committee recommended they be answered in the negative and noted the proper jurisdiction was Thompson's presbytery and Union's board. The minority report to establish an investigative committee failed at the Assembly 94 to 191. Writing later in 1973, Thompson commented on the conclusion of his case: "But there were now two clearly defined groups in the church, two wings, two divergent points of view, two extremes, some would claim, both equally sincere, one holding that newer points of view threatened the very existence of the faith, the other that they were essential if the faith was to remain viable for modern man" (Thompson, 3.338–339). This explains the liberal or "modernist" mindset—newer, critical views of Scripture were essential for Christians to appeal to "modern man." Rather than teaching "the rigid, unyielding Calvinism of earlier years," Thompson said PCUS seminaries were "prepared to accept insights from Barth, Brunner, Bonhoeffer, Tillich, and others" (Thompson, 3.494).

Similar to the Hay Watson Smith case, liberals in the PCUS protected Thompson through procedural methods, as Thompson's presbytery, synod, and seminary board were supportive of him, and the General Assembly refused to permit members of other presbyteries or synods to bring charges against him (Smith, p. 85). That conservatives were unable to drive theological liberals such as Smith and Thompson out of the PCUS demonstrates the church was changing. Conservatives recognized this, as the Thompson case led PCUS conservatives to meet weeks later to found an independent weekly periodical, the *Southern Presbyterian Journal*, which began publication in May 1942 with L. Nelson Bell (1894–1973) as editor (Lucas, pp. 89–99). In 1959,

the name was changed to the *Presbyterian Journal*, and G. Aiken Taylor (1920–1984) was made editor. This journal was a voice of conservative dissent in the PCUS and helped lead to the formation of the PCA in 1973.

PCUS Negotiations with the Northern Church (PCUSA)

While the PCUS was liberalizing, for a time in the 1930s it looked like the church had rejected ecumenism in favor of "isolationism" (a phrase used by Thompson in his *Presbyterians in the South*). In a vote of 175 to 79, the 1931 General Assembly withdrew from the Federal Council of Churches (FCC), which the PCUS had joined in 1912 and consisted of more than 20 denominations at the time (Smith, p. 130; Thompson, 3.552). The PCUS considered rejoining the Council in 1937, with the Assembly referring the question to the presbyteries for advice (although re-entry only required a majority vote by the General Assembly). The presbyteries voted 48 to 38 against re-entry, as conservatives opposed the Council because they thought it was controlled by modernists.

However, in 1941, the Assembly voted 154 to 101 to rejoin the Federal Council of Churches, and the attempt at reversal the next year failed 60 to 190 (Thompson, 3.553). Another effort to leave the Council, led largely by laymen, also failed 108 to 274 at the 1948 General Assembly (Thompson, 3.556). In 1950, the Federal Council of Churches joined seven other organizations to form the National Council of Churches (NCC). Conservative opposition to the National Council argued it was friendly toward Communism, evidenced by the Council advocating that China should be admitted into the United Nations in 1958 (Lucas, pp. 129, 204–207). PCUS opposition to the National Council of Churches continued, peaking in the mid-1960s, in part because the Council also supported civil rights. However, debate in the PCUS at that point shifted to relations with the Northern Presbyterian Church (Thompson, 3.558).

Amidst withdrawal from the FCC in 1931, the PCUS had been exploring more formal associations with other churches, particularly the Northern Presbyterian Church (PCUSA). The PCUS had entered into negotiations with the PCUSA in 1887, but those were ended by the PCUS General Assembly in 1888. The same happened in 1894–95. In 1914, the PCUS made the change to require

15. The 1941 publication of the pamphlet included all documents for and against Thompson, which Glasgow then mailed to all commissioners to the 1941 General Assembly. Tom Glasgow, *A Statement For and Against Dr. Thompson* (Charlotte, NC: privately printed, 1941).

three-fourths of the presbyteries to approve a union with another denomination, which added an additional barrier to talks with the Northern Church (Smith, p. 119).

Yet in 1929, the PCUS General Assembly finally made a move toward reunion with the Northern Church. Several presbyteries asked the church to “take active steps toward organic union of all Presbyterian bodies in the United States.” The Assembly voted 125 to 9 to set up an Ad Interim Committee, which would report each year to the General Assembly (Thompson, 3.558–559). This signaled a change in the direction of the PCUS towards ecumenism. In 1929, representatives from five of the leading Reformed and Presbyterian churches in America—the PCUS, PCUSA, UPCNA, RCA, and RCUS (Reformed Churches in the United States)—met in Philadelphia, and committees of all except the RCUS approved “Organic union with other Presbyterian and Reformed Churches on the basis of their existing Standards” (Thompson, 3.559).

While the 1930 PCUS Assembly agreed to continue union discussions, the 1931 Assembly voted to suspend all negotiations and meetings looking to union, yet also ordering the Ad Interim Committee to draft a plan for “A Federal Union of our Church with any or all Presbyterian or Reformed bodies.” Yet the committee reported the next Assembly that no church expressed interest in such a federal union (Thompson, 3.560). In 1937, the Ad Interim Committee on union with the Northern Church recommended that “no action be taken touching any plan of union” because no other churches had accepted plans for union. However, there was a substitute motion to replace the Ad Interim Committee with a Permanent Committee on Cooperation and Union, which was passed without debate (Lucas, p. 138). This Permanent Committee on Cooperation and Union was to explore merger possibilities and report to the Assembly. There were efforts in 1942 to change the Committee’s task to just cooperation instead of union, but that failed.¹⁶ Conservative opposition to reunion led to the formation of the Continuing Church Committee in 1944, which “promoted a vigorous and aggressive education program” in opposition to the plan of union (Lucas, p. 149).

As steps toward union progressed, conservatives made efforts to ensure a congregation could leave the PCUS with its property if such a merger took place. In 1938, the General Assembly approved an amendment

that would permit a church to withdraw from the PCUS with its property upon a majority vote, but the presbyteries rejected the amendment. The Assembly rejected another such amendment in 1942 (Thompson, 3.565). A 1946 overture also sought protection of church property in case of a church union. The Assembly answered that in case of union, “any individual congregation, presbytery or synod of the Presbyterian Church U.S.” that within a year declined to consent to a plan of union and sent the minutes to the Stated Clerk of the Assembly “shall automatically and by virtue alone of its own declaration be thereafter an independent or separate organization, with independent, full and complete title, both legal and equitable, to its properties.”¹⁷ This formed the background to conservatives seeking an “escape clause” in later merger plans.

Realizing there were not enough votes to bring about union with the Northern Church at the time, the Permanent Committee on Cooperation and Union in 1948 recommended “that for a period of five years the entire plan of reunion with the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., be held in abeyance, and that during this time the committee confine its activities to explore avenues of acquaintance and cooperation only” (Lucas, p. 151). However, it became apparent this supposed five-year moratorium was a means for ecumenists to work behind the scenes to bring about union. This is evidenced by the fact that only two years later, the 1950 General Assembly invited other Presbyterian and Reformed churches to consider a larger union of churches. And by 1952, there was a push for a three-way union that also included the UPCNA, a smaller church located in the North (Lucas, pp. 152–153). In the spring of 1952, committees from the PCUS, PCUSA, and UPCNA met to plan for union, and the 1952 PCUS Assembly voted in favor of a plan for a joint hymnal. Amidst such momentum for union, three unofficial groups in the PCUS announced their plan to form a central office to prevent the proposed merger—the Board of Directors of the *Southern Presbyterian Journal*, the Executive Board of the Continuing Church Committee, and the Association for the Preservation of the Southern Presbyterian Church. The 1953 plan of union permitted congregations in the PCUS and UPCNA churches to leave the denomination with their property by a three-fourths vote within one year after approval of the plan (Thompson, 3.569). Despite conservative opposition, the majority of leaders in the PCUS supported reunion with the North. After four hours of debate, the 1954 PCUS General Assembly voted 283 to 169 to merge with the Northern Church. However, this did

16. Smith, *How Is the Gold Become Dim*, p. 120, citing *Minutes of the PCUS General Assembly* (1942), p. 88.

17. *Minutes of the PCUS General Assembly* (1946), pp. 33, 60, cited in Smith, *How Is the Gold Become Dim*, pp. 120–121.

not receive the three-fourths approval of the presbyteries, with a vote of 43 presbyteries opposed and 42 presbyteries in favor of union.

At least three reasons for opposition to union with the Northern Presbyterian Church can be identified. First, there was concern over the Northern Church's support for racial integration, which was at odds with segregation in the South. The Northern Church had followed the call of the FCC (and later NCC) for integrated churches by dissolving segregated synods in the 1950s.¹⁸ Also contributing to opposition was the timely Supreme Court ruling only two weeks prior to the 1954 General Assembly, *Brown v. Board of Education*, which mandated public school integration, to the dismay of many in the South. While the *Brown* ruling was not the only reason for reunion's failure, it did feed the Southern Church's fear over the Northern Church's support for racial integration.¹⁹ Tied with this was conservative concern over the Northern Church's understanding of the spirituality of the church and its interference in political issues, including segregation.

The second reason for PCUS opposition to union with the Northern Church was that the Church was theologically liberal. Conservatives cited the PCUSA's ordination of women as elders and deacons, as well as the Auburn Affirmation (Lucas, p. 208; Thompson, 3.559). The Auburn Affirmation was a 1924 document signed by 1,274 ministers that protested the PCUSA General Assembly's declaration (in 1910, 1916, and 1923) that ministers must hold to the "five fundamentals" of orthodoxy (inerrancy of Scripture, virgin birth of Christ, substitutionary atonement, bodily resurrection of Christ, authenticity of miracles). The Southern conservatives were well aware of the Northern Church's theological liberalism and defrocking of J. Gresham Machen, the conservative stalwart of Southern stock. As Columbia Seminary professor William Childs Robinson (1897–1982) said against union, "Shall we stand... for the faith or shall we surrender our corporate testimony by uniting with Auburn Affirmationists in a body that does not regard such matters as the Virgin Birth, the substitutionary atonement and the resurrection of Christ as essential to ministerial ordination?"²⁰

The third reason for opposition to union with the Northern Church involved concerns over the PCUS losing its distinctives by becoming a national church. This included not only its identity as a Southern Church, but also its differing polity. Earlier opponents of union had cited the difference over ruling elders, as the North did not permit them to lay on hands in the ordination of pastors. The Southern Church's two-office

view contrasted with the Northern Church's three-office view, a difference going back to debates between Charles Hodge and James Henley Thornwell. Additionally, PCUS conservatives voiced concerns over the Northern Church's administrative centralization, as well as its practice of presbyteries owning church buildings rather than individual congregations. A merger could have made it difficult for conservatives to leave with their property (Thompson, 3.570–571).

PCUS Changes After the 1954 Reunion Plan Failed

By 1955 union with the Northern Church seemed unlikely for the near future. Yet it was not so much a question of if but when union would take place. As E. T. Thompson later said regarding the strategy of the five-year moratorium on church union in 1948, "the tide toward union was running strong, increasing each year through the new batch of ministers coming in from the seminaries" (Thompson, 3.574). Accordingly, liberals pushed for practices that aided a future reunion, including joint Sunday school curriculum and the publication of *The Hymnbook*, a 1955 joint hymnal between the PCUS, PCUSA, UPCNA, ARP, and RCA. 1959 then proved to be a watershed year for liberal victory in the PCUS. By then it was clear that "the liberals have taken over the organized leadership of the church," as Alabama businessman John Ames said. Ames cited Thompson's election as moderator of the 1959 General Assembly, saying he was elected by the "liberal machine" that sought to change the PCUS

18. Nathan P. Feldmeth, S. Donald Fortson III, Garth M. Rosell, and Kenneth J. Stewart, *Reformed and Evangelical Across Four Centuries: The Presbyterian Story in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022), p. 290.

19. Lucas, *For a Continuing Church*, pp. 155–160. Lucas notes that several historians blame *Brown* for the defeat of reunion, including Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, 3:574; David M. Reimers, "The Race Problem and Presbyterian Union," *Church History* 31 (1962): 203–215; Erskine Clarke, "Presbyterian Ecumenical Activity in the United States," in *The Diversity of Discipleship: The Presbyterians and Twentieth Century Witness*, ed. Milton J. Colalter, John M. Mulder, and Louis B. Weeks (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1991), p. 161. However, Lucas cites two historians holding that race was only part of the context for the defeat of reunion: Joel L. Alvis, Jr., *Religion and Race: Southern Presbyterians, 1946–1983* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1994), pp. 57–62; Bradley J. Longfield, *Presbyterians and American Culture: A History* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2013), pp. 191–195. Lucas "generally agrees" with Alvis and Longfield in *For a Continuing Church*, p. 158.

20. W. C. Robinson, "Reunion of the Presbyterian Churches USA and US," *Christian Observer* (January 24, 1940): 11, 22, quoted in Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, 3:570. Robinson taught church history and other subjects at Columbia from 1926 until 1967.

from “a spiritual organization” into “a political and social service organization.”²¹

In addition to Thompson’s election as moderator, the 1959 Assembly made two changes that aided reunion with the Northern Church—confessional revision and the adoption of “union churches.” The PCUS had already made some theological changes that cleared the way for reunification when in 1942 the church added two new chapters to the Westminster Confession of Faith, “Of the Gospel” and “Of the Holy Spirit,” softening the Calvinistic language of the Standards. These additions were nearly identical to the additions the Northern Church made to its confession in 1903.²² But in 1959, the PCUS also rewrote chapter 26, “Of Marriage and Divorce,” taking a more liberal approach to divorce.²³ The presbyteries had previously rejected such changes approved by the 1953 Assembly, but the report that year revealed the rise of a looser view of Scripture being advanced.²⁴ This weaker view of the Bible’s authority facilitated other changes, including the 1968 Assembly’s adoption of the Permanent Theological Committee’s report that the relationship between evolution and the Bible is one of “non-contradiction.” The 1970 Assembly then adopted a paper stating abortion is “morally justifiable” under several circumstances, including “socio-economic conditions of the family,” even establishing a fund to assist abortions.²⁵ The 1971 Assembly adopted a paper on “The Population Crisis,” which, following the claims of overpopulation, said, “man has an obligation to limit the size of his family.” That same Assembly adopted a paper on “Public Education,” commending public schools and accusing private schools of undermining them (an issue tied with racial integration).²⁶

In addition to confessional changes, the 1959

Assembly proposed, and the 1960 Assembly approved, a *Book of Church Order* amendment to create “union churches,” where the church’s ministers could be members of both Northern and Southern presbyteries (Thompson, 3.577). This created a sort of *de facto* union between the two churches (Smith, p. 121). The 1969 Assembly even permitted the creation of “union presbyteries” (Thompson, 3.581). However, this was not without controversy, as the 1968 Assembly’s amendment to permit union presbyteries was rejected at the presbytery level (38 in favor, 39 against), as was the amendment to reject union synods (37 in favor, 40 against). But in an unprecedented move, three presbyteries (Dallas, Mobile, and North Alabama presbyteries) moved to reconsider their votes on union presbyteries, only weeks before the 1969 Assembly. These three presbyteries passed union presbyteries with a two-thirds vote, which satisfied the requirement of a majority of presbyteries for a *Book of Church Order* change. The 1969 Assembly then voted to enact union presbyteries (Lucas, pp. 286–288).

With seventeen union presbyteries in place by the time the Northern and Southern Churches merged in 1983, the establishment of this practice made union inevitable. However, prior to the merger, union presbyteries meant UPCUSA ministers sat and voted in PCUS presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly, even though they did not subscribe to the standards of the PCUS. This is similar to how after the 1801 Plan of Union, congregational ministers sat in Presbyterian assemblies, a practice that was ended when an Old-School-dominated Assembly dissolved the plan in 1837 (leading to the Old School–New School split of 1837–38) (Smith, p. 126).

If the 1959 changes of union churches and confessional revision were not enough, the PCUS in 1964 permitted women to be ordained as deacons, elders, and ministers. In 1955, an Ad Interim Committee appointed by the General Assembly said, “We believe that the Holy Spirit is *leading us today* into a new understanding of the place of women in the Church,” recommending steps be taken to permit women to be ordained as elder and deacon. This was not enacted until the 1964 Assembly, after 53 presbyteries voted in favor of (and 27 against) changing the *Book of Church Order* to permit women to be ordained as elders, deacons, and also ministers (Smith, pp. 61, 179; Lucas, pp. 210–212). In 1965, the Hanover Presbytery ordained the first woman pastor in the PCUS, Rachel Henderlite, only nine years after the Northern Church ordained its first woman minister, Margaret Towner, in 1956. (The Northern Church had approved the ordination of women as deacons in

21. “Southern Presbyterian Group Says ‘Liberal’ Ministers Running Church,” *Mobile Register* (Oct. 20, 1959): 1, quoted in Lucas, *For a Continuing Church*, p. 133.

22. For the events leading up to this confessional revision, see Lucas, *For a Continuing Church*, pp. 52–65.

23. For the exact language used, see Smith, *How Is the Gold Become Dim*, pp. 251–253.

24. Regarding Christ’s teaching on marriage and divorce in Matt. 5:32 and 19:9, the report stated, “But the majority of New Testament scholars are strongly convinced that these words (the exception clauses) form no part of Jesus’ teachings,” leading to the conclusion that it is “likely that the Matthean exception does not reflect what Jesus said, and is to be rejected as a basis for formulating Christian doctrine.” *Minutes of the PCUS General Assembly* (1956), p. 137, quoted in Smith, *How Is the Gold Become Dim*, pp. 55–56.

25. Smith, *How Is the Gold Become Dim*, pp. 58, 63–64, 175, citing *Minutes of the PCUS General Assembly* (1970), p. 126.

26. Smith, *How Is the Gold Become Dim*, pp. 177–178, citing *Minutes of the PCUS General Assembly* (1971), pp. 149, 151.

1922 and as ruling elders in 1929.) Henderlite had been the director of the Covenant Life Curriculum (which conservatives opposed), and her ordination took place in All Souls Church in Richmond, Virginia, a predominantly black church where Henderlite was a member (Thompson, 3.478–479). By adopting confessional revision and women's ordination, the PCUS was mirroring its Northern counterpart, as both churches modernized their theology for an egalitarian age. These changes, along with union churches and union presbyteries, prepared the way for an end to the North–South divide of the Presbyterian church.

COCU and a Protestant “Superchurch”

After the PCUS presbyteries rejected union with the Northern Church in 1955, this plan had been further frustrated in 1958 when the PCUSA merged with the UPCNA. This merger, which formed the UPCUSA, required additional assessment of this larger Northern Church. However, while PCUS ecumenists desired reunion with the Northern Church, they were also interested in uniting with other churches, evidenced by their involvement in the Consultation on Church Union (COCU), also known as the “Blake–Pike Plan.” This was the hope of Eugene Carson Blake (1906–1985), Stated Clerk of the UPCUSA, who preached a sermon on uniting Protestants at Grace Episcopal Cathedral in San Francisco on December 4, 1960, at the invitation of Bishop James Pike of the Protestant Episcopal Church. The 1961 General Assembly (UPCUSA) then sent invitations to the Methodist Church (USA), the Protestant Episcopal Church, and the United Church of Christ to unite. Representatives from these four churches met in 1961, with its formal meeting in 1962 that also included the PCUS, then called the Consultation of Church Union (COCU).

The 1962 PCUS Assembly rejected overtures to negotiate mergers to form a Protestant “superchurch” as part of COCU. However, the PCUS became a full participant in COCU at its 1966 Assembly, a “surprising action” that was approved by five synods, which Thompson took as evidence of a “massive change of sentiment in the church” (Thompson, 3.579–580). The 1966 Assembly's move stirred to action the Concerned Presbyterians (a laymen's organization founded in 1964 by leaders associated with the *Presbyterian Journal* and a successor to the 1940's Continuing Church Committee). The *Presbyterian Journal* saw the 1966 resolution on COCU as evidence that a split within the PCUS was inevitable (Thompson, 3.580). G. Aiken Taylor described the

1966 Assembly as a “massive victory for the ‘ecumenical’ brethren.”²⁷

The 1967 PCUS Assembly decisively declined to withdraw from COCU. Then in 1968, leaders from Concerned Presbyterians met for prayer, which led to meetings in February and July 1969. At the latter meeting they agreed to a seven-point statement called “The Declaration of Commitment,” which included opposition to the church union that COCU membership represented. These ministers called themselves Presbyterian Churchmen United (PCU) (Lucas, p. 269). Robert Strong, pastor of Trinity Presbyterian Church (Montgomery, Alabama) summarized conservative concerns when he said, “Radical ecumenicists caused the crisis in the Church and they plan the liquidation of confessional Presbyterianism in the Southland.”²⁸

In the background of this push for inter-denominational ecumenism was the influence of campus ministries, many of which were inter-denominational college groups that brought Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, and Disciples of Christ together in the South. Seven out of every ten PCUS students were attending a public college by 1965, showing the influence college ministries were having on the PCUS (Thompson, 3.454). These groups often became involved in leftist politics, including the promotion of Communism. The PCUS had its own campus ministry, Westminster Fellowships, which, as Sean Lucas notes, “tended to be much more liberal theologically and socially than the congregations from which the students came,” and “students were exposed to social-gospel issues—poverty, illiteracy, racism, economic justice—but heard little gospel preaching or teaching.” Westminster Fellowships struggled, leading the PCUS Board of Christian Education in 1966 to phase them out and instead share campus ministries with other denominations (Lucas, pp. 214–215). In 1961, Aiken Taylor observed that it was in college ministries “where advanced ideas in ecumenism and other new religious forms most often find their earliest implementation.” Taylor said PCUS “student work on college campuses” was “marching right ahead into organic mergers designed to ‘bury’ all denominational differences in a unified program.” Taylor listed the National Council of Churches as a “motivating force in the movement,” as the “student work officials of the various denominations” (including the PCUS) for five years negotiated “a unified outreach”

27. G. Aiken Taylor, “The Assembly Acted...,” *Presbyterian Journal* (May 11, 1966): 7.

28. “Rally Applauds Pledge of Continuing Church,” *Presbyterian Journal* (Dec. 17, 1969): 7–8.

plan for campus work that was implemented in 1960. Taylor concluded, “Here is the Ecumenical Church already alive and functioning where it will have the most effect: among students.”²⁹

THE PCUS–RCA PLAN OF UNION

PCUS Negotiations with the RCA

Such wide-ranging ecumenism formed the background to the PCUS in 1961 beginning serious merger conversations with the Reformed Church in America (RCA), even though there was a continued desire among PCUS ecumenists to unite with the Northern Presbyterian Church. The PCUS and RCA had formed a “plan of cooperation” and discussed union in 1874, but this ended when both churches joined the World Alliance of Reformed Churches formed that year. This met the desire for cooperation, and the two churches later “worked together for over a decade in close cooperation in the field of Christian Education and in the development of the Covenant Life Curriculum.”³⁰

Along with the Layman’s Bible Commentary (25 volumes between 1959–64), the Covenant Life Curriculum was a 1960s project of the PCUS Board of Christian education seeking to make, in its own words, “new developments and insights” (i.e., critical scholarship) available to laypeople (Thompson, 3.463). *Presbyterian Journal* editor, G. Aiken Taylor, criticized the curriculum for presenting a Barthian view of revelation (that Scripture is only a witness to revelation and “becomes” the Word of God when received), among other forms of theological liberalism (Lucas, pp. 225–233). This sharing of the more liberal Covenant Life Curriculum suggests the theological trend of the RCA was in step with the PCUS. This is confirmed by the fact that while the PCUS opened all church offices to women in 1964, the RCA followed by opening the offices of elder and deacon to women in 1972 and the office of minister to

women in 1979. In addition to shared curriculum, the RCA and PCUS were also both members of the more progressive National Council of Churches.

In 1950, the PCUS and PCUSA had sent a joint letter “to all Presbyterian and Reformed bodies in the United States,” including the RCA, to consider a plan of union, but the RCA was not interested. At the same time, there had been merger talks between the RCA and another Presbyterian church in 1950, the UPCNA, though both churches turned this down.³¹ The UPCNA merged with the PCUSA shortly after this in 1958 to form the UPCUSA (the body that would merge with the PCUS in 1983).

Interest in church union then came from within the RCA, showing ecumenism was alive and well among the Dutch Reformed. Three classes sent overtures suggesting union with the UPCUSA (Philadelphia, Westchester, Paramus), the Synod of New York suggested union with the PCUS, and two classes suggested joining the Blake–Pike discussion of a larger merger (Columbia, Ulster). The RCA then established an Executive Committee to investigate union.³² The Executive Committee met with representatives of the UPCUSA but decided to terminate discussions.³³ An RCA subcommittee then recommended that its Executive Committee meet with the PCUS Permanent Committee on Inter-church Relations “for the purpose of discussing the possibility of closer cooperative relationships” (Thompson, 3.576).

The RCA General Synod Executive Committee and the PCUS Permanent Committee on Inter-Church Relations held consultations by sub-committees and then met in Washington, D. C. on April 3–4, 1962. These two groups submitted a Resolution to the RCA General Synod and the PCUS General Assembly, which was adopted by both in 1962. This 1962 Resolution recommended that “the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America and the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States affirm their common purpose, as branches of the Holy Catholic Church, to seek together a fuller expression of unity in faith and action.” The stated desire was “to give more effective witness to the Gospel, and especially to the Reformation emphasis on the authority of Scripture and the Sovereignty of God as expressed in the Lordship of Jesus Christ.” Notably, the Resolution read from the preamble of the 1874 “plan of cooperation” that acknowledged that “unity may, in our view, be effectually manifested by us in the absence of outward ecclesiastical uniformity, with which it ought never to be confounded, and which ought never to

29. G. Aiken Taylor, “Student Work Already Merged,” *Presbyterian Journal* (Jan. 4, 1961): 10.

30. *The Acts and Proceedings of the One Hundred and Fifty-Seventh Regular Session of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America* (1963), p. 202 [*Acts and Proceedings of the RCA General Synod*].

31. *Acts and Proceedings of the RCA General Synod* (1950), pp. 152–153; O. M. Walton, “U. P. Presbyteries Vote on Merger,” *The Christian Century* 67/20 (May 17, 1950): 630. As of April 1, 28 of 30 U.P. presbyteries voted in favor of the merger, but by May 5, 17 of 48 presbyteries voted against (with only 51 total).

32. *Acts and Proceedings of the RCA General Synod* (1961), pp. 133–138, 330–331.

33. Spragens, “Conversations with the Reformed Church in America,” *Austin Seminary Bulletin* 80/3 (Nov. 1964): 27.

be purchased at the cost of truth.”³⁴ The Resolution recommended that each assembly of the two churches authorize a committee of twelve persons to constitute a Joint Committee of Twenty-Four, which was to report annually to the RCA General Synod and PCUS General Assembly.

In studying the doctrine of the two churches and addressing the confessional differences, the Joint Committee enlisted two theologians from each church, Felix B. Gear of Columbia Theological Seminary, John H. Leith of Union Theological Seminary (Virginia), Elton Eenigenburg of Western Theological Seminary, and Howard G. Hageman.³⁵ The Joint Committee of Twenty-Four presented a Report to the 1964 assemblies that stated that the committee had met six times. The subcommittee composed of the four theologians compared the doctrinal standards of the two churches and concluded that a comparison of “these two sets of standards reveals many minor differences, but complete basic unity,” crediting the differences to the Westminster Standards being written after the rise of Protestant scholasticism, almost a century after the earlier Reformed standards. The Report noted that the Westminster Standards “are in much greater detail than the Reformed Church standards and much more specific theologically,” but stated that “both confessional systems are expressive of historic Calvinism.”³⁶ The Committee of Twenty-Four appealed to Christ’s high priestly prayer “for the unity of His people that ‘the world might believe.’” Finding “large areas of agreement in theology, polity, and worship,” with “no major impediments,” the Committee therefore stated, “we envision the union of our two churches.”³⁷

In 1965, the Joint Committee recommended against expanding union conversations with the UPCUSA because of its “involvement” in the Consultation of Church Union with other churches. Instead, the Committee of Twenty-Four recommended that the two assemblies instruct the Committee to draft a Plan of Union, which both assemblies approved.³⁸ Unlike the PCUS’s prior discussions with the Northern Church, proceedings with the RCA experienced little opposition until the final vote. The RCA was about a quarter of the size of the PCUS, as the RCA had a membership of around 250,000, while the PCUS had a membership just under one million.³⁹ While not as large as the Northern Presbyterian Church, the RCA complemented the PCUS as a Northern counterpart and would make the united church a national rather than sectional church. The only challenge raised by the proposed merger for the PCUS was how this would impact the opportunity

for reunion with the Northern Presbyterian Church (Thompson, 3.576–577).

PCUS Acceptance of the RCA Merger Plan

The 1962 PCUS General Assembly rejected negotiations with the Blake–Pike Plan (COCU), showing the PCUS was committed to exploring union with the RCA, at least for the time being.⁴⁰ In 1965, the PCUS Assembly even put talks on hold with the UPCUSA because of serious conversation with the RCA.⁴¹ Thus, PCUS–RCA union seemed to be a very real possibility—that is, until the 1966 PCUS Assembly entertained other suitors. In response to communication from the UPCUSA, the 1966 PCUS General Assembly directed its Permanent Committee to explore the challenges of a union with the UPCUSA, inviting the RCA to also participate. The 1966 Assembly also adopted a resolution expressing its desire to become a full participant in the Consultation on Church Union (COCU), a move that would prove to be fatal to the RCA union proceedings. Still, the 1967 PCUS Assembly finalized a draft of the Plan of Union with the RCA. The following year the Assembly passed that plan in crushing numbers, 406 to 36.⁴² It was even approved by more than three-fourths of the 79 presbyteries, leaving the next steps to be the RCA’s approval and then the 1969 PCUS Assembly’s approval. However, that vote would never come because of the RCA’s rejection at the classis level.

The failed effort notwithstanding, it is worth highlighting some aspects of the proposed Plan of Union between the PCUS and RCA, which would form a new church called the “Presbyterian Reformed Church in America.” Notably, this plan would have (1) weakened ministerial vows, (2) removed the Westminster Larger Catechism and Canons of Dort from the doctrinal standards, (3) omitted the office of deacon, and (4) made church property belong to the presbytery and not the congregation (a change for the PCUS). The new ministerial vows would have required accepting the Bible as only being “inspired by the Holy Spirit, and the unique

34. *Acts and Proceedings of the RCA General Synod* (1962), p. 349.

35. *Acts and Proceedings of the RCA General Synod* (1963), p. 205.

36. *Acts and Proceedings of the RCA General Synod* (1964), pp. 310–311.

37. *Acts and Proceedings of the RCA General Synod* (1964), pp. 318, 321.

38. *Acts and Proceedings of the RCA General Synod* (1965), pp. 277–278.

39. John B. Spragens, “Conversations with the Reformed Church in America,” *Austin Seminary Bulletin* 80/3 (Nov. 1964): 24.

40. *Minutes of the PCUS General Assembly* (1962), pp. 72–74.

41. Smith, *How Is the Gold Become Dim*, p. 124, citing *Minutes of the PCUS General Assembly* (1965), p. 81.

42. *Minutes of the PCUS General Assembly* (1968), pp. 94–96.

and authoritative guide to faith and life,” thus weakening the vow to Scripture’s authority. The vows also would have required the affirmation of doctrinal standards merely “as setting forth the essential doctrines of the Christian faith as they are revealed in the Holy Scriptures.”⁴³ The removal of the Westminster Larger Catechism and the Canons of Dort would eliminate the most detailed theology of the two churches and thus weaken the extent of subscription. Oddly, the Plan of Union removed the office of deacon and passed that function onto elders, directly at odds with Scripture (1 Tim. 3:1-13) (Smith, p. 128).

Morton H. Smith (1923–2017), a founding professor at RTS and first stated clerk of the PCA, noted that while not in the written record, a tape record showed that when Judge John A. Fulton presented the Plan of Union to the 1968 PCUS General Assembly, he stated the plan to make the church property belong to presbytery was a change from the Southern Presbyterian position (Smith, p. 128). (In the PCUS, property belonged to the congregation, but how that would play out in civil court in a separation from the denomination was not always clear.⁴⁴ This explains the desire for an “escape clause.”) This move surely would have alarmed conservative churches that considered leaving. The fear was that the liberals were attempting to change the *Book of Church Order* to make explicit “implied trust,” where the congregation holds its property in trust for the denomination. There was hopeful precedent from a 1966 Georgia Supreme Court case that awarded church property to two congregations that left the PCUS, but this was no guarantee for PCUS churches outside the state of Georgia (Lucas, pp. 295–296).

However, while property ownership might have changed, the PCUS–RCA Plan of Union also included an “escape clause” that would permit congregations to leave their denomination with their property within a

year after the union.⁴⁵ Smith said that “there were some conservatives who were willing to vote for this Plan, because it provided an escape clause, and this may account for the sharp departure from the faith that is represented by three-quarters of the Presbyteries approving the Plan.” Yet Smith noted that “None of this is in the records” (Smith, p. 128). Smith’s explanation appears to be based on his first-hand knowledge through discussions with presbyters who voted in favor of the Plan in their presbyteries, and there is little reason to doubt such an account. E. T. Thompson also said the RCA union “was acceptable” to conservatives “because of the ‘escape clause’” (Thompson, p. 581). And three years later in 1971, Andrew Jumper, a leader of the moderate Covenant Fellowship, even accused conservative leaders of supporting a plan of union with the Northern in exchange for an “escape clause,” suggesting this had been a conservative strategy.⁴⁶ The continued conservative resistance to union with the Northern Church would lead to the expectation of greater resistance to the union with the RCA than was recorded. Instead, the PCUS Assembly passed the Plan of Union with the RCA 406 to 36, and over three-quarters of the presbyteries voted in favor of the plan. The best explanation of the widespread support for a merger with the RCA was that many PCUS conservatives sought to leave the church via an escape clause as part of the Plan of Union.

RCA Rejection of the Merger Plan

After the 1966 PCUS General Assembly voted to become a “full participant” in COCU, the RCA Committee of the Twelve said in an addendum to their Report that the PCUS’s action “was not anticipated by the Joint Committee.” The RCA’s Committee did not think the PCUS Assembly intended to “affect the preparation of the Plan of Union,” but it did recommend the RCA General Synod send a letter to the PCUS General Assembly requesting it “clarify our mutual relationship in light of the actions of the 1966 General Assembly.”⁴⁷

The records indicate that PCUS interest in other churches is what sealed the fate of the Plan of Union. The PCUS already had union churches with the UPCUSA that began in 1959, and many in the RCA were opposed to a later merger with the UPCUSA.⁴⁸ However, it was the PCUS’s 1966 move to join COCU that was the nail in the coffin. As G. Aiken Taylor noted, the 1966 PCUS Assembly’s actions “were considered contradictory by most observers,” as the Assembly voted to participate in COCU, which “has had little sympathy within the RCA.” Taylor thought that the PCUS’s

43. Smith, *How Is the Gold Become Dim*, p. 127, citing *Proposed Plan of Union Between RCA and PCUS*, p. 461; *Acts and Proceedings of the RCA General Synod* (1968), pp. 278, 288–289.

44. Interestingly, the PCUS–RCA Joint Committee of Twenty-Four, in comparing the RCA and PCUS, said of the PCUS property issue—“Who owns the property?” is a question of civil law. Presbytery’s involvement arises only when church is dissolved or ceases to exist (FG, 6-3), or when church attempts to remove itself and its property from the communion” in *Acts and Proceedings of the RCA General Synod* (1965), p. 280.

45. *Acts and Proceedings of the RCA General Synod* (1968), pp. 292–293; Thompson, p. 581.

46. Andrew Jumper, “Is This the End for the PCUS?” *The Open Letter* (Jan. 1971): 1, cited in Lucas, *For a Continuing Church*, p. 273.

47. *Acts and Proceedings of the RCA General Synod* (1966), p. 302.

48. *Acts and Proceedings of the RCA General Synod* (1968), pp. 290–292.

joining of COCU “means that the four-year conversations with the Reformed Church in America are, to all practical purposes, defunct.”⁴⁹ And he would be right.

In 1967 and 1968, a number of overtures were sent up by RCA classes to the General Synod calling for the Plan of Union to “cease.” In 1967, the Classis of Dakota overtured the RCA General Synod to “cease” the Plan of Union “until such a time as they withdraw as an active participant in C.O.C.U.” The reasoning was that “the Presbyterian Church U.S. has broken faith with the R.C.A. by becoming an active participant in C.O.C.U.,” as the Committee of Twenty-Four “originally agreed that no other merger conversations would be entered upon, by either denomination, until such a time as the question of merger between the Reformed Church in America and the Presbyterian Church U.S. be resolved.” The overture stated that the PCUS’s involvement in COCU raised a “red flag” for those hesitant for a merger.⁵⁰

There were also several 1967 overtures to withdraw from the National Council of Churches, with two citing the NCC’s position on Scripture. The Classis of South Grand Rapids gave the reason that “The leadership of the NCC is composed almost entirely of those who hold a ‘liberal’ or non-scriptural view of the Bible.”⁵¹ This displays an anti-ecumenical spirit in some parts of the RCA that would conflict with the plans of ecumenists in the PCUS. More overtures were sent to the 1968 RCA General Synod to cease the Plan of Union.⁵² However, the 1968 RCA General Synod approved the Plan of Union with 183 voting in favor and 103 against.⁵³ The plan then went on to the classes, where it needed two-thirds (a minimum of 30 classes). Yet while the PCUS had a higher threshold (three-fourths of the presbyteries), it passed the Plan of Union, and it was in the RCA where it failed to pass two-thirds of the classes (though it was passed by a majority of the classes).⁵⁴ It is noteworthy that despite the PCUS joining COCU, the PCUS–RCA Plan of Union was still able to garner the support of the RCA General Synod and over half the RCA classes.

The Formation of the PCA

Thus, 14 years after the PCUS had rejected union with the Northern Presbyterian Church in 1954, it sought to unite with another liberalizing Reformed body in 1968—only to be rejected by the RCA. It seems that while the 1954 defeat of union with the Northern Church gave hope to PCUS conservatives that they could control the church, that hope faded and they instead turned to a “defensive strategy”—supporting union with the

RCA or UPCUSA that would include a form of “escape clause” to allow conservative churches to secede peacefully and with their buildings.⁵⁵ Another possible explanation of the overwhelming vote in favor of the RCA merger is that PCUS conservatives thought the merger would strengthen their cause. However, although the RCA was fairly conservative in the Midwest at the time, it was heavily liberal in its Eastern churches, as well as its eastern seminary, New Brunswick (NJ) Theological Seminary. The proposed merger between the PCUS and RCA would have increased the total number of conservatives, but it likely would have decreased the percentage of conservatives in a united church.

PCUS conservatives had to analyze the possible outcomes of discussions with the RCA. If the merger were successful, they reasoned “that such a merger would impede rather than aid liberal plans for union with the United Presbyterian Church,”⁵⁶ as the Northern Church would have to consider joining with a diverse denomination rather than a simple reunification with the Southern Presbyterian Church. However, if the merger failed, PCUS conservatives anticipated this would increase momentum for union with the Northern Church, the very thing they opposed.⁵⁷

Ironically, this failed merger between the PCUS and RCA helped lead to the formation of an entirely separate church body in 1973, the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). For the RCA’s rejection of the proposed merger led the 1969 PCUS General Assembly to immediately look elsewhere for church union, which it did by approving the establishment of a merger conversation with the Northern Presbyterian Church (UPCUSA). The 1969 PCUS Assembly instructed its moderator, Rev. Matthew Lynn of Midland, Texas, “to appoint a committee to open immediate negotiations for union with the” UPCUSA (Thompson, p. 581). The Joint Committee of the PCUS and UPCUSA, also known as the Committee of Twenty-Four (12 members from each church and eventually increased to 30 members), reported to each General Assembly beginning in 1970. And after a

49. Taylor, “The Assembly Acted...,” *Presbyterian Journal* (May 11, 1966): 6–7.

50. *Acts and Proceedings of the RCA General Synod* (1967), p. 119.

51. *Acts and Proceedings of the RCA General Synod* (1967), p. 115.

52. *Acts and Proceedings of the RCA General Synod* (1968), pp. 106–110.

53. *Acts and Proceedings of the RCA General Synod* (1968), p. 284.

54. *Acts and Proceedings of the RCA General Synod* (1969), pp. 205, 303.

55. Frank Joseph Smith, *The History of the Presbyterian Church in America: The Continuing Church Movement* (Manassas, VA: Reformation Educational Foundation, 1985), p. xiii.

56. Frank Smith, *ibid.*, p. 43.

57. Frank Smith, *ibid.*, p. 43.

liberal route at the 1971 General Assembly, the conservatives knew they had to leave the PCUS. As G. Aiken Taylor said after the Assembly, “In short, to all practical purposes, the show is over.”⁵⁸

The draft Plan of Union with the UPCUSA presented to the 1971 PCUS General Assembly included an “escape clause” for those churches that did not support the union and wanted to leave. However, the Joint Committee abandoned a provision for an escape clause in February 1973, even asking the 1973 Assembly for permission to scratch the prior plan and draft a brand-new plan (which would delay the union). With the escape clause off the table, conservatives in the PCUS knew leaving the denomination would likely become much more difficult after a merger with the more liberal Northern Church. Thus, in response to the Joint Committee’s abandonment of an escape clause, 21 churches of the Tuscaloosa Presbytery requested dismissal from the PCUS to form the new Warrior Presbytery. This request was granted, and 20 of the 21 churches were released with their property. The Steering Committee for a Continuing Presbyterian Church met the next week and put forth its “Reaffirmations of 1973,” which called for a new church body that calendar year.⁵⁹ The Steering Committee had representatives from four conservative organizations—*Presbyterian Journal*, Concerned Presbyterians, Presbyterian Churchmen United, and Presbyterian Evangelistic Fellowship. By August 1973, 14 presbyteries were formed to receive churches leaving the PCUS. (Ten churches and 16 pastors and elders had earlier formed the independent Vanguard Presbytery on September 7, 1972, whose churches joined the PCA in 1977.)

This new church body would be called the National Presbyterian Church, though it would be changed to the Presbyterian Church in America one year later due to threats of lawsuit from a UPCUSA church in Washington D. C. The PCA held its first General Assembly on December 4, 1973, with 260 congregations (519 by 1981) represented (Frank Smith, p. 451). Its first moderator

was ruling elder Jack Williamson, and its first stated clerk was teaching elder Morton H. Smith. With many of the conservatives gone, the PCUS had little resistance to a merger with the Northern Church. It took ten more years, but the PCUS and UPCUSA merged to form the PCUSA on June 10, 1983. The PCUS presbyteries voted in favor of the union 53 to 8, and the UPCUSA presbyteries voted in favor 152 to 3.⁶⁰

While the PCA was formed in the context of opposition to reunion with the Northern Church, the PCA was not opposed to mergers in principle. This is seen in that only nine years after its formation, the PCA welcomed the RPCES as part of the 1982 Joining and Receiving, adding 164 churches and over 20,000 members. However, the PCA was also willing to reject mergers it did not see fit, seen in that the PCA also invited the OPC in 1982 but the PCA presbyteries rejected the OPC merger (after the OPC Assembly had approved). The PCA was charting its own course as a church. G. Aiken Taylor even advocated a realignment of conservative Reformed churches. And in 1971, he formed the National Presbyterian and Reformed Fellowship (NPRF), the predecessor to the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC), of which the PCA is a member to this day (Lucas, pp. 297–298).

The story of the failed PCUS–RCA merger shows the PCA was formed not only because of theological liberalism but also because of coinciding ecumenism in the PCUS. The liberal dream of reunion with the Northern Presbyterian Church concerned PCUS conservatives because liberalism’s advance in the Northern Church was beyond that of its Southern counterpart. The 1966 Assembly decision to join COCU was an even more radical exploration in ecumenism, with the goal of forming a Protestant superchurch. Consequently, prior to 1973, the PCUS had supported policies of the National Council of Churches, become a full participant in COCU, voted to merge with the RCA, and advanced union churches and presbyteries with the Northern Presbyterian Church. All of these ecumenical moves were evidence of the PCUS’s drift away from biblical authority and commitment to the Westminster Standards.⁶¹ The PCUS no longer desired to be a distinctively Presbyterian church in the South but a broad national church. Thus, theological liberalism and ecumenism cannot be separated in the history of the decline of the Southern Presbyterian Church. PCUS liberals sought visible church union at the expense of truth, while (many) PCUS conservatives severed union for the sake of truth. Amidst such severance the PCA was born.⁶²

58. G. Aiken Taylor, “The Assembly Tried to be Gentle,” *Presbyterian Journal* (July 7, 1971): 14.

59. Smith, *How Is the Gold Become Dim*, p. 129. For the “Reaffirmations of 1973,” see Appendix XVIII, pp. 357–369.

60. Feldmeth, et al., *Reformed and Evangelical Across Four Centuries*, p. 307.

61. Feldmeth, et al., *Reformed and Evangelical Across Four Centuries*, p. 299.

62. The author and the church he pastors have been influenced by much of the history documented in this essay. The author was a member of a conservative RCA church in college, attended RTS Jackson for seminary, and later left the RCA to join the PCA. His wife grew

REFLECTIONS ON SOUTHERN PRESBYTERIAN
ECUMENISM

To conclude, it is fitting to reflect on the ecumenical spirit advanced in the 20th century PCUS. In his survey of Presbyterian ecumenism between 1870 and 1920, D. G. Hart has argued that ecumenism “contributed to the antagonism between fundamentalists and modernists” as much as theological debates, a point he said is missed by many historians of 20th century Protestantism. Hart argued the differences between ecumenists and anti-ecumenists “provide a more fruitful way for understanding twentieth-century American Protestant history than the standard liberal/evangelical taxonomy.”⁶³ Whereas ecumenists “often blur ecclesiastical and theological differences into abstract notions of Christian unity and social harmony, Protestant confessionalists [who are anti-ecumenists] are localists when it comes to the work of the church.”⁶⁴ Hart’s analysis may be applied to the history of the PCUS, as the struggle in the 20th century was one over ecumenism along with theological liberalism.

As demonstrated, there was a clear shift in the PCUS’s approach to ecumenism after the Civil War and into the mid-20th century. In the earlier years, Southern Presbyterians were not welcomed by the Evangelical Alliance (founded in London in 1846 and the American branch in 1867) because of the PCUS’s refusal to condemn slavery.⁶⁵ Thus, while ecumenical movements tended to downplay doctrine, they often pushed a progressive agenda. Southern Presbyterian leaders subsequently criticized ecumenism for “doctrinal indifferentism” and defended denominations as a good that allows for differences of opinion.⁶⁶ This included criticism of the Presbyterian Alliance, a group founded in 1877 with similar aims as the Evangelical Alliance but with an appeal to Presbyterians.

Notable in this regard is 19th century Southern Presbyterian R. L. Dabney, whom Hart praised for “remarkable foresight” in detecting “within the union movement what would become the substance of liberal Protestant theology.”⁶⁷ Dabney helped bring about the merger between the New School and Old School churches in the South in 1864 (to form what would be called the PCUS), showing he was not opposed to all forms of church union—similar to how the PCA received the RPCES nine years after its formation. However, Dabney vociferously opposed reunion with the Northern Church and attacked ecumenism, or what he called “broad churchism.” This may suggest that Dabney was simply a Southern partisan (which he was) and that he

valued shared culture as essential to unity (which he did). However, there was also a theological component to Dabney’s analysis, as he identified the question not as whether Christians “should be one in aims, in spirit, in affection,” but “whether an organic unity is necessary.”⁶⁸ Unity in truth is the way to union, as Dabney explained: “The more they approximate the Bible standard, the more they will approach each other, not only in community of faith and love, but even in outward form.”⁶⁹

In his typical prophetic voice, Dabney warned against the spirit of ecumenism that would weaken the churches—“the same argument which demands that Presbyterian churches must be unified in a visible centre, will necessarily be extended to all others recognized as true churches, though non-Presbyterian.” He concluded, “Thus will come about a still wider confederation, not Pan-Presbyterian, but Pan-Protestant; and the necessary condition of its existence will be precisely that combination of loose, unfaithful, *doctrinal* broad-churchism, with tyrannical enforcement of outward union and uniformity, which now characterizes popery.” In this way, Protestants would seek “formal union” but “at the expense of that which” God “regards as of supreme value—doctrinal fidelity.”⁷⁰ Here Dabney anticipated that the desire for Presbyterian union would lead to broader Protestant union, such as the PCUS Plan of Union with the RCA and the COCU “superchurch” movement. Although the pan-Protestant COCU plan failed to transpire, pan-Protestant movements have continued to arise over the years (e.g., Campus Crusade for Christ and The Gospel Coalition). Sometimes these movements even involve more conservative constituents, but their doctrinal minimization inevitably leads to tolerance of more progressive elements.

up in a Presbyterian church in Kuwait, pastored by her father, that traces its history to the work of RCA missionaries in the 20th century. The church the author pastors, Bryce Avenue Presbyterian Church (PCA) in White Rock, New Mexico, was formed by a group that left the local UPCUSA, including its pastor Wayne A. Buchtel, to form a PCA church in 1975, originally known as Sangre de Cristo Covenant Church. G. Aiken Taylor, Morton Smith, and John Gerstner (UPCUSA at the time) had all preached at the church.

63. Hart, “The Tie that Divides,” *WTJ* 60 (1998): 87.

64. Hart, “The Tie that Divides,” *WTJ* 60 (1998): 106.

65. R. L. Dabney, “What Is Christian Union,” in *Discussions: Vol. II: Evangelical*, ed. C. R. Vaughan (1891; repr., Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1982), p. 441.

66. Hart, “The Tie that Divides,” *WTJ* 60 (1998): 95–96.

67. Hart, “The Tie that Divides,” *WTJ* 60 (1998): 97.

68. Dabney, “What Is Christian Union,” p. 430.

69. Dabney, “What Is Christian Union,” p. 437.

70. R. L. Dabney, “The Pan-Presbyterian Alliance,” in *Discussions: Vol. II: Evangelical*, pp. 537–538.

It should not be missed that broad churchism begins *within* a church, where the church broadens its tolerance of theological diversity, particularly in a more liberal direction. As the church becomes broader, it sees less reason for not being broader still. This is the temptation even for churches today that do not long for formal church mergers. If a church becomes broad enough, the church can expand even without mergers by welcoming more pastors and congregants of diverse doctrinal convictions.

In the case of the PCUS, its abandonment of doctrinal rigour led to greater desire for visible church unity, attuned to the spirit of 20th century America. PCUS seminaries were entrenched in higher criticism, training ministers to hold a lower view of Scripture's authority and thus weaker doctrinal convictions. As liberalism took root in the pulpit, more PCUS pastors and churches saw little reason to remain separate from the Northern Presbyterian Church. And if reunion with the Northern Church could not take place, they would settle for a merger with the RCA, or even churches outside the Reformed tradition (COCU). Greater visible church unity had to happen, and it had to happen *now*. Yet as the PCUS sought reunion with the Northern Church, this fueled further liberal changes in order to keep doctrinal differences out of the way of a potential merger. So the PCUS followed the PCUSA (and UPCUSA) down the path of throwing off all convictions of the past, whether it be biblical inerrancy, Calvinism, conservative social views, or the limitation of church office to men. It was a vicious cycle of liberalism driving ecumenism and ecumenism driving liberalism.

Anticipating the result of 20th century ecumenism, Dabney spoke of "men eager to subscribe a creed which they do not believe, and to explain away their unbelief and opposite convictions, as not adverse or new doctrines, but merely new methods of adjusting the philosophic relations of the old dogmas." This is the essence of liberalism, or modernism, where men "adjust" their creed to suit modernity. Yet this adjustment destroys the very creed it seeks to uphold. As Dabney added, "So numbing is the spirit of indifference begotten by this comprehension, that its tendency is to extinguish all true life in the church which practices it."⁷¹ Although writing in 1871, over 100 years before the formation of the PCA, Dabney foretold what was to take place in the 20th century PCUS—a spirit of doctrinal indifference and demand for visible unity that extinguished true life in the church. As confessional Presbyterians look

to the future, let us never forget that true life is found not in doctrinal indifference, but fidelity to the Word of God and its doctrines summarized in our confessional standards. ■

In Brief: In Fifty Years Another Division? J. W. Hassell, "The Pattern of Success," Mail Bag, *The Presbyterian Journal*, Volume XXXII, No. 17 (August 22, 1973): 2. James Wodrow Hassell (1886–1979) was a missionary to Japan and served a number of Southern Presbyterian churches, including the First Presbyterian Church in McAllen, Texas. "Following his retirement, he served many churches in the Statesville area and was supply pastor for Sweetwater Presbyterian Church and Belk Memorial Presbyterian in Hickory." Hickory Daily Record, "Area Deaths, Funerals. Dr. J. W. Hassell" (Tues., July 31, 1979): 12a.

The Pattern of Success. The Continuing Church appears now to be well under way. However, we ought to keep uppermost in our planning the kind of organization we intend to build. Are we to be content with simply a proper theology, Church aims that conform to the Great Commission, and right attitudes toward morals? These things are essential, and we must have them. However, it is necessary ever to keep in mind that what we are striving for is quality and not quantity—not number of churches, number of members, number of dollars, but discipline. We must have a return to the old Presbyterian emphasis on character building, on Sabbath observance, family worship, Bible study, catechism, and plain common honesty and truthfulness. And of course all this must be suffused with the love of God and the compassion and tenderness of Christ. There wasn't much the matter with our Church from 1861 to 1920. But then we relaxed and began to slip along all these lines. In 1921 there were over four thousand recitations of the catechisms, and numerous family altars were reported. Today such things have almost vanished. From the very infancy of the new Church we must turn over a brand new leaf and make a completed fresh start. Every minister, every session, every Sunday school teacher should be dedicated to the supreme task of building character, and be satisfied with nothing less. Any other course will bring us fifty years hence to another division. But only as long as the new Church is solid in its faith and moral character will it be permanent in fact as we all so earnestly pray.—Rev. J. W. Hassell, Hickory, N.C. ■

71. R. L. Dabney, "Broad Churchism," in *Discussions: Vol. II: Evangelical*, pp. 460–461.