

Obedient to the Great Commission: The Presbyterian Church in America at Fifty

By Zachary Groff

The fifth chapter of Acts presents a series of conflicts between apostles and apostates in the early church. The chapter opens with the bone-chilling deception and demise of the apostates Ananias and Sapphira (vv. 1–11), who sought to defraud God and His nascent apostolic church. Following a fearful purging of the church membership rolls, the apostles proceed to perform miracles in the very heart of Jerusalem, teaching in the Name of Christ Jesus the Risen Lord (vv. 12–32). The boldness and fruitfulness of the apostles' ministry incurred the murderous wrath of the Jewish authorities (v. 33), apostates of a different variety—and with much more power—than Ananias and Sapphira.

Into the proceedings at this point enters “a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the Law, respected by all the people” (v. 34).¹ His contribution to the tense deliberations is nothing short of fascinating. Not only does he stay the hands of his bloodthirsty colleagues in the Sanhedrin, but he does so by appealing to two examples of false starts among the Jews. He cites the failed projects of Theudas (v. 36) and Judas of Galilee (v. 37) as he persuades his fellow Council members to disregard the apostles who were stirring up so much enthusiasm for Jesus. His closing words are telling. “So in the present case, I say to you, stay away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or action is of men, it will be overthrown; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them; or else you may even be found fighting against God” (vv. 38, 39). Behind Gamaliel's slick political calculus, there lies either a latent interest in the apostolic mission or a skeptical—even sardonic—dismissal of their signs and wonders.

When the Steering Committee for a Continuing Church was nearing the completion of its work in the early 1970s, the result of which would be the separation of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) from the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS),

certain of their colleagues in the PCUS skeptically dismissed their project as doomed to failure and obsolescence. Their rationales were many and varied. The personalities of the leading men of the conservative movement were too big—they would surely trample over each other in their zeal to wield influence in a new and untested denomination. Temperaments were too hot and ungovernable among the rank-and-file, and the new Church would never hold together. Their resources were too poor and their men too inexperienced to bring such an ambitious effort to lasting fruition. However, what Gamaliel said either snidely or sincerely of the apostles proved true for that first generation of the PCA: “if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them; or else you may even be found fighting against God.” A half-century on from the May 1973 Convocation of Sessions and first General Assembly in December of that same year, God has blessed the PCA with vitality, vigor, and a great deal of fruitfulness in shared ministry.

The PCA is a lot of things. Some have described our ecclesial society as a big tent, a denominational thought-leader, a warm evangelical church, a staunchly Presbyterian body, and a whole slew of less pleasant monikers which do not merit acknowledgement in print. Whatever the PCA is, its founding generation aspired for it to be an “intensely Presbyterian”² denomination committed to historic Presbyterian polity, the doctrine of the

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1. All Scripture citations are taken from the New American Standard Bible (1995).

2. This phrase figures prominently in the *Message to All Churches* published by the denomination at its formation, which was in turn a republication of the 1861 *Message to All Churches* published by the Southern Presbyterian Church (PCCSA/PCUS) at its initial formation.

Westminster Standards as adopted by American Presbyterians, and the extension of Christ's kingdom at home and abroad. With earnest energy and a sober estimation of the difficulties that attend the mandate which Christ has given to His church, the PCA is devoted to fulfilling the Great Commission to the glory of the one, true, living, and triune God. At 50 years young, it is proper to reflect on what exactly God has accomplished through the PCA, for it is the work and blessing of God that describes what the PCA was, is, and shall be as its churches "hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering" (Heb. 10:23) in the years to come. Our biblical fidelity grounds us, our confessional commitments identify us as distinct from our brothers and sisters in other branches of the visible church, and our obedience to the Great Commission definitively characterizes the unique place which the PCA occupies in Christ's kingdom.

In what follows, this article presents a survey of the 50-year history of the PCA in a series of five decades, focusing not on conflicts between apostles and apostates, but primarily on the work in which every resource of the PCA is invested: the Great Commission to "make disciples of all the nations" (Matt. 28:19). A brief conclusion considers several challenges likely to face the Church in the near future.

As the continuing expression of the Southern Presbyterian Church, the PCA maintains a strong commitment to the proclamation of God's Word and fervent prayer, and it shares with its Southern Presbyterian forebears an emphasis on ministering in Christ's Name through personal evangelism, discipleship, missions, and church-planting. These positive and constructive efforts of the PCA occupy a central place in denominational life. Though individual people and places are mentioned throughout this article, in no way can an historical survey include a comprehensive roster of all the influential leaders and self-sacrificing servants who have contributed

to the PCA and its ministries. Those who are mentioned in the following pages are merely representative of the various personalities and officers who have contributed to what has made—and continues to make—the PCA a "Great Commission" Presbyterian Church.

1973–1982: A NEW BEGINNING IN AN HISTORIC MISSION

Even prior to the birth of the PCA, outspoken missionaries and evangelists were champions of theological renewal and missional revitalization in the PCUS. Such men had recognized that by 1970, the PCUS as a denomination had abandoned its historically biblical ministry in terms of both gospel message and spiritual mission. The task at hand for theologically conservative Presbyterians in the American South was to secure the future of the Church's historic mission of God-glorifying ministry, even if that meant leaving the PCUS. In what "began as a research project for the Steering Committee [for a Continuing Presbyterian Church], which was to have served the purpose of providing the Committee with reliable references to the deviations by the Presbyterian Church in the United States from the scripture and from her doctrinal Standards,"³ Southern Presbyterian luminary and founding Professor of Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary (RTS) Dr. Morton Howison Smith (1923–2017)⁴ documented the theological and missional decline of the PCUS as evidenced by the actions of the General Assembly through the course of the mid-twentieth century.

While Dr. Smith's intended readers were the men on the Steering Committee, and his research was not published for a broader audience before 1973, there were others who vigorously and widely promoted the cause of a Continuing Presbyterian Church. One of those early proponents was PCUS missionary to Japan William A. McIlwaine (1893–1985). It was his personal appeal in 1953, for example, that convinced a young Morton Smith of his duty to pursue biblical "reform in the Southern [Presbyterian] Church"⁵ (whatever it would end up looking like, over time). McIlwaine would serve as the moderator of the fourth General Assembly of the PCA in 1976. Another proverbial watchman on the wall was founder and first executive director of Presbyterian Evangelistic Fellowship (PEF), William E. "Bill" Hill, Jr. (1880–1983). In 1969, Hill published a catalytic article in the *Presbyterian Journal* entitled "Go Along Or Go Forth." Referring to Hebrews 13:13, Hill called for ecclesiastical separation from the PCUS for the sake of faithfulness to Christ.⁶ He later echoed

3. Morton H. Smith, *How Is the Gold Become Dim: The Decline of the Presbyterian Church, U.S. As Reflected in Its Assembly Actions*, Third Edition (Greenville, SC: Southern Presbyterian Press, 1998 [1973]), p. iv.

4. Dr. Smith would go on to serve as the PCA's first Stated Clerk (1973–1988) and founding professor and Dean of Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

5. Morton H. Smith, quoted in Joseph A. Pipa, Jr., "Morton Howison Smith: A Brief Sketch of His Life," in *Confessing Our Hope: Essays Celebrating the Life and Ministry of Morton H. Smith on His Eightieth Birthday*, ed. Joseph A. Pipa, Jr. and C. N. Willborn (Greenville, SC: Southern Presbyterian Press, 2004), p. 14. N.B. An updated and expanded version of the biographical essay cited here appears as an article in the present issue of *The Confessional Presbyterian*.

6. Otto Whittaker, *Watchman, Tell It True: The life and Here-I-Am-Lord times of Bill Hill—pastor, evangelist, and one-time liberal who*

this call in the opening address to the May 1973 Convocation of Sessions held at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, GA, “The No-Compromise Man and the No-Compromise Church.”⁷ Though examples drawn from the founding generation could be multiplied to fill many volumes, these two representatives—McIlwaine and Hill—suffice to establish a precedent pattern for the vigorous reformer-missionary spirit with which the PCA was endowed in the first decade of her existence.

At the PCA’s beginning in 1973, its domestic and foreign missions efforts were inherited not from any official denominational organ or presbytery of the PCUS, but from PEF. Kennedy Smartt recalls that the first General Assembly received “with gratitude all the funds, records, correspondence, and equipment which were being turned over to the National Presbyterian Church⁸ by the Presbyterian Evangelistic Fellowship⁹ for the work of the nascent denomination’s domestic missions efforts. For its foreign missions, the denomination absorbed the full organizational infrastructure and resources of PEF’s Executive Commission on Overseas Evangelism (ECOE) (pronounced “echo”), including its thirteen missionaries engaged in five works around the world.¹⁰ From these humble beginnings, the PCA has sent forth hundreds of missionaries under the auspices of Mission to the World (MTW).

But what was the aim of these missionary efforts? Being obedient to the Great Commission meant then and means now that the mission of the Church’s outreach around the world must be distinctly spiritual and ecclesiological. As per a statement adopted and published at the third General Assembly in 1975, it was the express desire of the Assembly in these early years “that the primary thrust of Mission to the World continue to be the establishment and strengthening of Presbyterian and Reformed churches in other countries, keeping a high proportion of church-planting-oriented missions over service-support missions, with constant effort towards improving the current proportion” (M3GA, p. 115).¹¹ Missions exists for the Christ-exalting increase of visible churches constituting a worldwide society of God-worshippers. Service projects, however important and at times necessary, are ever and always ancillary to the church-planting efforts of missionary endeavors. This was the expressed intention and missionary desire of the PCA’s founders from the earliest years of the denomination’s existence.

Beyond the purview of MTW, congregations and presbyteries have sent ordained men to engage in focused church-planting efforts in other countries, in much the same way that congregations and presbyteries

plant churches domestically. Taken together with the PCA’s constitutional openness to partnership with voluntary parachurch organizations for kingdom-extension,¹² foreign missionary efforts pursued outside of—or alongside of—MTW’s organizational apparatus are expressive of the PCA’s so-called “grassroots Presbyterianism,” a value and cultural trait of the PCA present from the start of the denomination. Jared Nelson helpfully writes, “The phrase generally communicates the understanding that the PCA has been a bottom-up denomination that was formed with a conscious effort to give more power to the presbyteries rather than to the General Assembly as the locus of authority and power.”¹³ Unlike the more centrally directed Mainline denominations (e.g., the PC(USA) and the PCUS before it), the PCA operates in such a way so as to discourage centralized administrative bloat while allowing the lower courts (i.e., local church sessions and regional presbyteries) to do the work of the Church without the bureaucratic impediments and political intrigues that attend massive organizational apparatuses. Denominational decentralization of power wedded together with the aim of being—in the words of Ruling Elder Jack Williamson (1919–2009), Moderator of the first General Assembly—“intensely Presbyterian in form of government”¹⁴ sometimes resulted in missional confusion, as indicated by the Assembly’s failed multi-year

came back to every jot and tittle of the inerrant Word of God (Manassas, VA: Reformation Educational Foundation, 1981), p. 407.

7. Whittaker, *Watchman, Tell It True*, pp. 444–451.

8. Note that the PCA initially bore the name ‘National Presbyterian Church’ before enacting a change at the second General Assembly (1974) in deference to a Mainline Presbyterian congregation in Washington D.C. bearing that name.

9. Kennedy Smartt, *I Am Reminded: An Autobiographical, Anecdotal History of the Presbyterian Church in America* (Chestnut Mountain, GA: Self-Published, n.d.), p. 109.

10. For more background on ECOE, including its similarity to J. Gresham Machen’s Independent Board of Presbyterian Foreign Missions, see Whittaker, *Watchman, Tell It True*, pp. 414ff.

11. Presbyterian Church in America, *Minutes of the Third General Assembly*, Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, Lawrenceville, GA, 1975, p. 115; heretofore, all references to the *Minutes* will imitate the parenthetical reference above.

12. See *Book of Church Order (BCO)* 14–1.6. Note that all BCO references are to the version incorporating all amendments approved through the 50th General Assembly (2023).

13. Jared Nelson, “Grassroots Presbyterianism & Amending BCO 34–1,” *Presbyterian Polity* (blog), October 13, 2022, <https://pcapolity.com/2022/10/13/grassroots-presbyterianism-amending-bco-34-1/>.

14. W. Jack Williamson, “To God be the Glory,” *Addresses Delivered During the First General Assembly* (Birmingham, AL: The Continuing Presbyterian Church, 1973), p. 11. Note that the speaker was echoing the language of the *Message to All Churches*.

attempt to adopt a constitutionally binding Directory for Public Worship.

One method which the PCA's founders used early on to ensure administrative decentralization was the geographical separation of the denomination's permanent Committees across different cities. Dr. David W. Hall observes, "Decentralization was still so important that the Assembly originally located its four permanent Committees in four different cities: Jackson, MS; Montgomery, AL; Columbus, GA, and Decatur, GA."¹⁵ The Church eventually abandoned its commitment to geographic decentralization in the 1980s. However, formal authorization to investigate how best to consolidate denominational office space was not granted until the ninth General Assembly in 1981 (*M9GA*, p. 156). Incidentally, this was the last PCA General Assembly to be hosted by a local church (Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Fort Lauderdale, FL) until 1991. It was also the last Assembly before the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod (RPCES) folded into the PCA through a process called "joining and receiving" (J&R).

Before the coming together of the PCA and the RPCES, the PCA was the decidedly larger denomination with a strong conservative evangelical (and Southern) culture. As a theologically evangelical denomination, the PCA rejected continuationism, a central conviction of the charismatic movement gaining traction in American Christianity in the 1970s. In the original (and unchanged) language of *BCO* 7-1, the PCA affirmed that extraordinary officers in possession of extraordinary "gifts related to new revelation have no successors since God completed His revelation at the conclusion of the Apostolic Age." This was a live issue at the first General Assembly, but a committee appointed at that Assembly produced a pastoral letter approved at the second Assembly reaffirming the *BCO*'s language (*M2GA*, pp. 170-175). That committee included RTS Old Testament professor Jack Brown Scott (1928-2011) and Westminster Theological Seminary professor O. Palmer Robertson,

both of whom taught generations of PCA pastors. As a culturally conservative group, the PCA adopted the theologically biblical moral stance of condemning abortion as murder. Hall appropriately connects this development with a powerful and informative presentation by Ruling Elder and physician Dr. William P. Thompson (1944-2021) at the sixth General Assembly in 1978.¹⁶ After J&R, the PCA's commitment to protecting the lives of children otherwise unwanted by society found high-profile public representation in the work of another Ruling Elder, U. S. Surgeon General under President Ronald Reagan, C. Everett Koop (1916-2013).¹⁷

On the eve of the PCA's reception of the RPCES, the PCA had grown since 1973 from 260 to 519 congregations, 17 to 25 presbyteries, and 40,614 to 91,856 communicant members.¹⁸ By comparison, the RPCES had 189 congregations across 17 presbyteries and comprised of 25,673 communicant members at the time of its joining with the PCA (*M9GA*, p. 156). Though the RPCES in 1982 was much smaller than the PCA was even in 1973, the 1982 merger was significant in terms of both numbers and geographic footprint. With the ratification of J&R, what began as a Continuing Southern Presbyterian Church became a truly national American Presbyterian denomination, reporting a total of 803 congregations across 36 presbyteries, and comprising 150,322 members, including 130,376 communicant members and 19,946 non-communicant members (*M11GA*, p. 173). The first decade of the PCA's existence proved that the fledgling denomination had staying power and momentum for growth, surely by the grace of God alone.

1983-1992: ADJUSTING TO A NEWLY NATIONWIDE SCALE

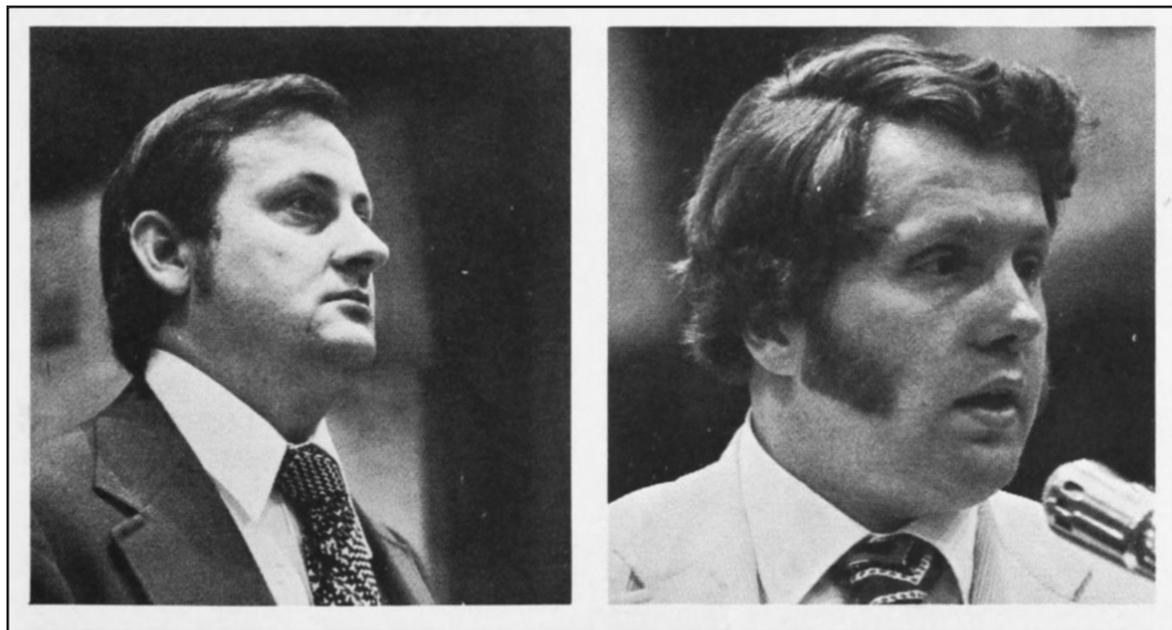
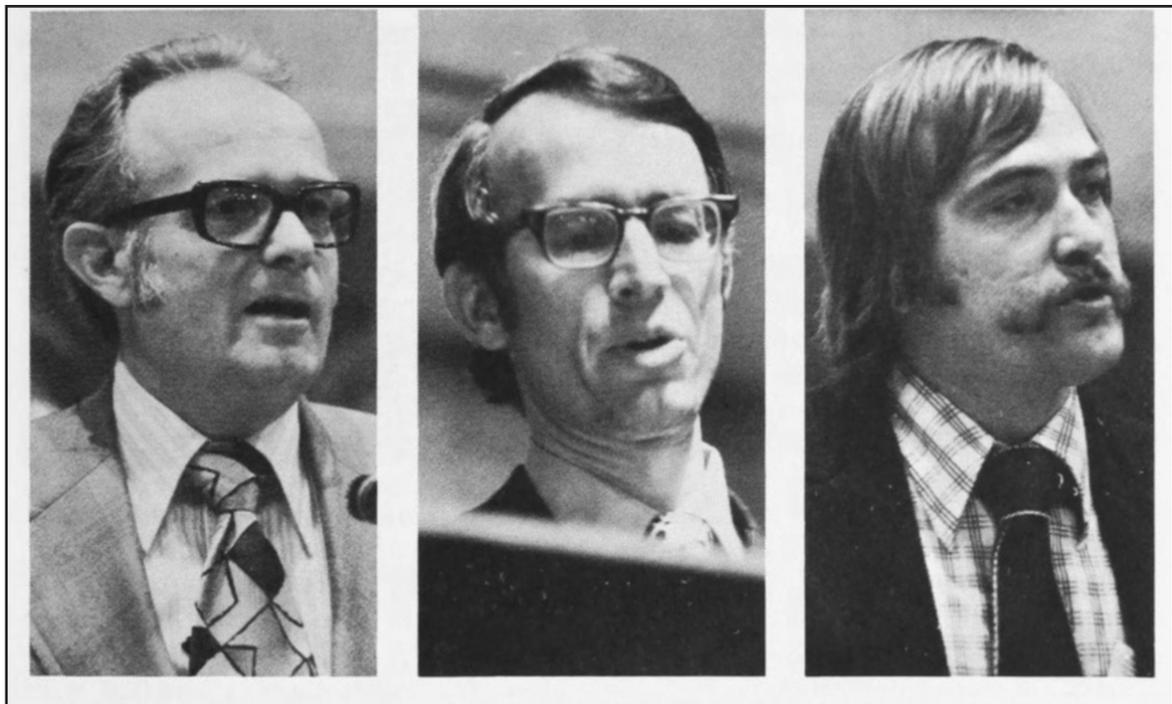
With the absorption of a smaller but nationwide denomination came the expansion not only of the PCA's geographic reach, but also of its leaders' ambitions for the extension of that visible expression of Christ's kingdom. Somewhat ironically, 1983 also marked the merger of the liberal Mainline Presbyterian Churches in the American North and South to form the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The sheer size of the resultant Mainline Presbyterian body (over 3.1 million members in 1983) made any kind of statistical comparison between the PCA and the PC(USA) farcical. That did not discourage denominational leaders in the PCA from setting audacious goals for denominational growth as they looked forward to the new millennium (nearly two decades away), now with the resources of a denominational college and seminary at their disposal.

15. David W. Hall, *Irony and the Presbyterian Church in America* (Powder Springs, GA: Covenant Foundation 2023), p. 56.

16. Hall, *Irony and the Presbyterian Church in America*, p. 72.

17. For example, see Hall, *Irony and the Presbyterian Church in America*, p. 113. Note that Koop collaborated closely with Dr. Francis Schaeffer (1912-1984) in the production of the 1978 film *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* Hall further remarks that Dr. James Montgomery Boice (1938-2000) of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia notably supported Dr. Koop and his public stands in the field of medicine.

18. Note that total membership (including non-communicants) was not recorded in 1973, but that the total membership in 1981 was 104,218, inclusive of 12,362 non-communicant members (*M10GA*, p. 134).



PCA First General Assembly: “BCO Monopolizes Assembly Attention”. “Ralph Didier, [upper] left, of Anaheim, Cal., thought the wording of 7-1 was too categorical, but Palmer Robertson, center of Philadelphia, Pa., supported the statement, which denied present-day miraculous gifts. So did Joey Pipa of Tchula, Miss. who said extraordinary gifts ceased with the apostles. Host pastor Frank Barker, [see next page], thought such an epochal view was dispensational, and urged acceptance of extraordinary gifts. And Don Dunkerly, [lower] right, said he would support the possibility of special gifts, though the canon was closed and the apostolic office had ceased. On his feet for this and many other discussions was Charles Dunahoo [left], chairman of the constitutional documents committee. By the way, host pastor Barker is [shown next page] during the opening program, when he ‘ordered’ the choir to stay for the whole thing.” These photos originally appeared in the Dec. 19, 1973 issue of *The Presbyterian Journal*. Used with permission from WORLD News Group.



PCA First General Assembly and the Miraculous Gifts of the Apostles. Frank Barker. See the descriptions on the prior page. Used with permission from WORLD News Group.

The 11th General Assembly, by way of a recommendation from the Committee of Commissioners on the newly acquired Covenant Seminary, directed the Administrative Committee of the denomination to study what it would take to grow to one million members by the year 2000. The recommendation reads as follows:

That in view of the denomination's aim to reach one million members by the year 2000, and to continue our missionary emphasis, a systematic analysis be undertaken by the Committee on Administration to assess how many new pastors and missionaries can be projected to be needed per year to replace retiring ministers and to provide church planters, pastors, missionaries, chaplains, and other ordained ministers during the coming ten years, and to ascertain how many candidates for the PCA ministry are currently being generated from the presbyteries, in seminaries and colleges, or from other denominational backgrounds; and that the results of the study be reported back not later than the 1985 General Assembly, with a progress report made to the 1984 General Assembly.¹⁹

Though the hopes of these optimistic churchmen did not come anywhere close to realization in the intervening years, their zeal was admirable. In service to King Jesus, may the lofty goals of those early generations of PCA elders remind us that “in a multitude of people is a king's glory, but in the dearth of people is a prince's ruin” (Prov. 14:28). There is no shame in desiring church growth, so long as such growth is not pursued at the

¹⁹ *M11GA*, p. 75; cited in Hall, *Irony and the Presbyterian Church in America*, p. 93.

expense of biblical fidelity and doctrinal integrity. Without maintaining faithfulness to the Scriptures and true commitment to the Reformed faith, whatever may be growing will be something entirely other than a Presbyterian church! In fact, the rapid swelling of the ranks with the receiving of the RPCES put a strain on the PCA's ministry at precisely these two points of biblical fidelity (in worship) and doctrinal integrity (in discipline) in the second decade of her existence.

Throughout the 1980s, the General Assembly, meeting in conference centers and ballrooms rather than churches and college campuses, revisited—again and again—the matter of the Directory for Worship's constitutionality. The 11th General Assembly in 1983 opened the PCA's second decade on a high note with the ratification of three chapters of the Directory for Worship as constitutionally authoritative. However, there remained a divide in the denomination on what to do with the rest of the Directory. Some presbyters wanted to complete the work left unfinished by the Church's founders and ratify the whole Directory for Worship (either as received or as amended) as fully constitutional. Still others seemed content, or even insistent, to leave the Church without a constitutionally defined set of principles for worship beyond what had already been adopted. Agreement on the matter eluded the denomination as it continued to grow—albeit at a slower pace than previously enjoyed—in its second decade. At the 16th General Assembly in 1988, the Assembly approved—“after considerable discussion, with various motions” and strenuous objection—the following recommendation during the report from the Committee of Commissioners on Judicial Business: “That we leave the Directory for

Worship in its present status in the Church and dismiss the entire matter” (*M16GA*, pp. 169f.). As the years progressed and General Assembly worship services grew more elaborate, the issue became urgent for men who objected to the increasingly performative nature of Assembly worship.

During the report of the Committee of Commissioners on Administration at the 19th General Assembly in 1991, for instance, the following motion was narrowly defeated by a vote of 308–384: “Until such time as there is greater unanimity within the PCA re. the subject of worship, local arrangements committees are encouraged to include in their Assembly worship services only those elements outlined in the Directory of Worship” (*M19GA*, p. 136). One might justly inquire as to the practical use of a Directory for Worship which cannot authoritatively determine the bounds of what is and is not acceptable at the Assembly’s worship services, much less in the worship services of local churches and regional presbyteries. Though the tension over standards in worship was left unresolved, the question of how to pursue doctrinal integrity in the exercise of discipline in a “grassroots” nationwide Church received a more constructive answer before the end of the PCA’s second decade.

The Standing Judicial Commission (SJC) of the PCA was established at the 17th General Assembly in 1989. This important and unique commission of the General Assembly hears and decides disciplinary cases that make their way through the appeals process from the lower courts of the Church. The creation of the SJC addressed a major inefficiency of the Assembly’s business, for thorny discipline cases had begun to take up a disproportionately (and inconveniently) large measure of time during the first two decades of the Church’s existence. Attempts to restructure the General Assembly as a delegated body better suited to handle complex cases of church discipline failed, and so the Church chose a different solution. With the problem only getting worse after the RPCES was brought into the PCA *en masse*, the Assembly created the SJC to take on the caseload.

The importance of the SJC to the PCA’s witness and order cannot be understated. Whether or not its existence can be deemed to comport with biblical Presbyterianism does nothing to diminish its significance for the life of this expression of Christ’s Church.²⁰ As of the writing of this article, the Standing Judicial Commission “shall consist of twenty-four (24) members divided into four classes of three teaching elders and three ruling elders in each class. Each class shall serve a four-year

term and each subsequent Assembly shall declare the Standing Judicial Commission as a whole to be its commission” (*BCO* 15–4). Though space limitations prohibit anything approaching an exhaustive survey of the key decisions of the SJC, an illustrative example from the early years of the Commission’s existence will serve to demonstrate its importance to (and in) the PCA.

Within just two years of its creation, the SJC proved its significance to the denomination in its far-reaching decision in Case 90–8 of *T. E. David Bowen vs. Eastern Carolina Presbytery*. At the 19th General Assembly in 1991, the SJC presented for approval its decision affirming “the judgment of Eastern Carolina Presbytery in that Infant Baptism (WCF 28–4) and Limited Atonement (WCF 3–3, 8–5 and 11–4) are to be considered fundamentals of the system of doctrine and that there can be no exceptions given in the case of officers in the church” (*M19GA*, p. 84). With the Assembly’s adoption and approval of this decision by the SJC, the Church established a precedent for disallowing either anti-paedobaptists or those who deny definite/limited/effectual atonement from occupying ordained office in the PCA. This precedent remains in force today, upholding the historic Presbyterian position that while a credible profession of faith in Christ as offered in the gospel is all that is required for adult church membership, yet theological adoption of the confessional Standards of the denomination—represented metonymically in this case by certain “fundamentals of the system of doctrine”—as one’s own statement of faith is required for all those who would serve in ordained office. Further deliberation about confessional subscription awaited the courts of the Church in the future.

The decision of the SJC in *Bowen vs. E. Carolina Presbytery* further clarified that *BCO* 43–10 empowers higher courts to annul the election, ordination, and installation of officers even after said officers have assumed the functions of their office. Thus, if a church member or members file a complaint with a presbytery against the action of a local session in ordaining and installing technically ineligible individuals to office, and the presbytery finds the complaint in order, it can (by sustaining the complaint) reverse the action of the lower court and annul the ordination and installation of the officer(s) in question. *Bowen vs. E. Carolina Presbytery* is but one example among many important decisions made, and precedents set, by the SJC over the years.

The enlarged scale (and potential) of the PCA

20. See Scott Cook’s article in this issue of *The Confessional Presbyterian*, “The History of the Formation of the Standing Judicial Commission.”

brought about certain cultural changes by the end of its second decade, especially at the national level of the Church's denominational life. In the first place, the second decade witnessed a shift away from local church facilities for meetings of General Assembly. In place of spacious worship halls, the Assembly preferred—or needed—to meet in hotel ballrooms and convention centers. This change in typical practice increased the cost of General Assembly participation year-to-year, but it also led to a marked professionalization in the conduct of denominational business. This change of typical venue represented a shift in the Assembly's character, and this shift was reflected in both the worship and the business of the Assembly.

In the second place, by the end of the second decade there emerged definable factions, if not organized parties and interest groups, operating within the PCA. A trend of open advocacy of certain positions and sometimes-private caucusing for specific ecclesiastical aims increased over time, and especially as means of electronic communication became ever more prevalent. David Hall writes,

Several significant meetings took place in September of 1990. One group met in the Johnson City, Tennessee, area under the leadership of Dr. Morton Smith, who spoke about the original distinctives of the PCA; in so doing, this group was looking for ways to keep the PCA conservative. Another group, consisting mainly of 25 of the largest churches, met in Atlanta under the guise of attempting to help implement a specific committee's directions. However, more in the church realized that this [large-church] group was a powerful voting caucus which had successfully approved most of its concerns at the recent General Assembly. It was thought across the church, unfortunate as it was, that two alternative and conflicting groups were beginning to caucus behind the scenes, if not overtly.²¹

As the years wore on, the PCA would play host to various named groups, networks, partnerships, and extra-ecclesiastical organizations that expended time, money, and energy to influence the Church in one direction or another.

A third—and far more quantifiable—trend was the solidifying of a preponderance of Teaching Elder participation in General Assembly over against a waning proportion of Ruling Elder participation. Whereas Ruling Elders made up anywhere between 36.1% and

53.7% of commissioners to each of the first ten General Assemblies (1973–1982), that range dropped down to anywhere between 27.6% and 34.7% in the second decade of Assemblies (1983–1992). The Assembly was becoming more professional, more clerical, and more contentious in the years that the men and churches of the RPCES settled into their new denominational ecology within the PCA.

The PCA as a nationwide American Presbyterian denomination going into its third decade reported a total of 1,226 congregations (including mission works) across 54 presbyteries, and comprising 242,560 members (including 2,239 ministers, 195,352 communicant members and 44,969 non-communicant members). While the denomination's advance to the new millennium in its third decade would not yield the desired four-fold increase in membership, the PCA would make important strides in exploring how to be "obedient to the Great Commission" considering the emergence of factions in its second decade. In fact, the PCA's focus on the Great Commission would give the two factions an important arena for their ecclesiastical wrangling in the conduct of the Church's foreign missions efforts through MTW.

1993–2003: CHURCH OR PARACHURCH? PRESBYTERIAN OR EVANGELICAL (OR FUNDAMENTALIST)?

The 21st General Assembly in 1993 opened the PCA's third decade with a shot across the bow. David Hall writes, "Retiring Moderator Wilson Benton, one of the finest and most esteemed preachers in the PCA, challenged those in the minority or supportive of the Old School past to feel free to withdraw from the PCA."²² Hardly a conciliatory gesture, the conflict it revealed was but one of several recurring difficulties grimly threatening the unity of the denomination as it approached the turn of the century. One of those difficulties was the matter of who reserved the right to report denominational news.

The denomination's administration, under the leadership of Stated Clerk Dr. Paul R. Gilchrist since Dr. Morton H. Smith's retirement from the role in 1988, struggled to keep up with emerging communications technologies. The Administrative Committee disavowed at least one grassroots publication incorporating the "PCA" name under the oversight of a local church session rather than under the management of denominational authorities. Eventually, the 28th General Assembly in 2000 resolved the controversy over news organizations covering the PCA when the Assembly decisively

21. Hall, *Irony and the Presbyterian Church in America*, pp. 172f.

22. Hall, *Irony and the Presbyterian Church in America*, p. 226.

protected the right of “an independent press” (M28GA, p. 290).²³

Over the course of the 1990s, Dr. Frank J. Smith’s “PCA News Service, Inc.” was funded and managed entirely apart from any coordination with or support from the Administrative Committee based in Atlanta. The matter of propriety in use of the “PCA” name in this case was resolved at the 24th General Assembly in 1996 when the publisher agreed to change the name of the publication in response to a formal request from the Assembly.²⁴ The fact that it took an action of the General Assembly to persuade the publisher to acquiesce to the demands of the Administrative Committee reveals a far more serious struggle in the denomination than the relatively superficial matter of rights to an acronym.²⁵

Of greater significance was the matter of how the growing denomination would direct its work. Would the PCA order its cooperative and nationwide ministries primarily through boards or through the Assembly? This question would (and continues to) manifest itself in a variety of mission-critical issues encompassing everything from educational institutions, denominational publications, administrative operations, judicial processes, and missions efforts. In keeping with the focus of this article, what follows is a brief treatment of how this issue affected the PCA’s denominational missions efforts from 1993 to 2000.

The PCA’s vigorous enthusiasm and efforts in both domestic and foreign missions became in many ways more of a central preoccupation in the 1990s than they were even in the expansionist early years of the denomination. It was at this time that Redeemer Presbyterian Church experienced its explosive growth in New York City under the ministry of founding pastor Timothy Keller (1950–2023). Biographer Collin Hansen recently described Keller as a church-planter who “sought to translate for the local church the best parachurch insights he had seen and experienced himself.”²⁶ Keller published his approach in the popular church-planting manual and textbook, *Center Church*.²⁷ This book has become one of the most popular church-planting resources available among urban church-planters in the PCA and in other denominations around the world, with the *Redeemer City to City* church-planting network promoting its approach among many church plants that are not an organic part of the PCA.

It was also in this period that the 26th General Assembly in 1998 cautioned the growing denomination, “Presbyteries should take care that they do not divide prematurely, causing one or more of the resulting presbyteries to lack the resources necessary for their future

growth. On the other hand, a presbytery may become so large that it cannot give adequate attention to the needs of the churches and ministers within its own membership, and may find even its efforts at church planting and other growth in ministry difficult” (M26GA, p. 180). The growth of the denomination itself through church-planting and the multiplication of presbyteries was no mere potentiality, but a live issue in the PCA’s third decade. Yet, the alluring methods and freedom from ecclesiastical strictures available in voluntary parachurch organizations became—as in Keller’s approach—something that church-planters and denominational administrators wanted to emulate.

The draw to extra-ecclesiastical avenues of obedience to the Great Commission is a phenomenon with deep-rooted historical vintage in American Presbyterianism. The Church’s imitation of voluntary societies for church-planting harkens back to the nineteenth century Old School Presbyterian controversy over partnership with independent agencies and boards for missions efforts in contrast to entrusting the Church’s missionary endeavors exclusively to commissions of the Church courts.²⁸ During the twentieth century, voluntary societies for evangelism and discipleship became known as “parachurch” organizations, for they presented themselves as operating alongside (para-) and in support of churches. Whereas domestic church-planting and foreign missions were largely one and the same during the westward

23. Quoted in Hall, *Irony and the Presbyterian Church in America*, p. 289.

24. See Hall, *Irony and the Presbyterian Church in America*, pp. 264–266.

25. *Editor’s Note*: No one, including Dr. Morton H. Smith, who until 1988 was the Secretary of the officially registered “Presbyterian Church in America” corporation (by virtue of his being Stated Clerk of the General Assembly), other than the denominational administrator who filed the request, knew that someone had applied for registering the “PCA” acronym as a service mark in the mid-1980s. The Committee on Administration acting as the Board for “Presbyterian Church in America (A Corporation)” had sought to register the denominational name, but not the initials. The name was granted service mark status, but that was rescinded after the PC(USA) objected. The action of the 1996 Assembly to protect the service mark effectively ratified the registration. However, that was about a decade after the fact. Nonetheless, the original authorization to file the paperwork with the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office only mentions the full name, not the acronym initials.

26. Collin Hansen, *Timothy Keller: His Spiritual and Intellectual Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2023), p. 197.

27. Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012).

28. See D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking a Better Country: 300 Years of American Presbyterianism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 2007), p. 140f.

expansion of the Presbyterian Church into the American frontier during the nineteenth century, the more recent history of the PCA divides these into two distinct spheres of missionary endeavor. The controversy in the courts of the PCA over how to be obedient to the Great Commission during the 1990s was most heated in connection with foreign missions.

With the collapse of communism and fall of the Iron Curtain in Europe—dramatically signified by the removal of the Berlin Wall in late 1989—a long-closed door for missions opened anew into the former Soviet bloc. For the still-young PCA, this was an unprecedented opportunity for the expansion of the Church's missionary efforts. By the end of the 1990s, MTW dramatically expanded its missions efforts in places such as Ukraine and eastern Europe, while involving more of the PCA than ever before in short-term and summer missions excursions. However, the decade had opened with contested plans, heated debate, and close votes regarding MTW's cooperative agreements with other organizations, administrative costs, and a previously undisclosed transfer of funds from MTW to the Administrative Committee for the stated purpose of procuring and furnishing suitable office space for the denomination's administration.²⁹ Through the 1990s, presbyters complained that the administrative fees which MTW levied on its missionaries were excessively burdensome, and commissioners to General Assembly made proposals for the fees' amelioration or avoidance altogether. In these discussions and debates, the idea of a local or presbytery-centered model of missionary oversight and support became increasingly desirable, even as MTW sought to rebuild trust as the PCA's official sending agency. In these efforts, MTW's administrative structures and communications more and more resembled those prevalent in parachurch missions agencies.

In the run-up to the 23rd General Assembly, MTW experienced a set-back in efforts to win support from skeptics within the denomination. Two veteran and well-respected missionaries to Spain—Rev. Jack Campbell and Rev. Manuel “Tito” Padilla, now with Reformed Ministries International and Equipping Leaders

International, respectively—resigned from MTW, claiming that their agency team leaders directed them not to administer baptism to infants in public worship services in their mission work in Madrid.³⁰ Around the same time, MTW Coordinator Dr. Paul Kooistra wrote a brief article entitled “Missions with a Capital ‘R’” distributed through MTW's *Network* newsletter.³¹ The “R” stood for “Reformed.” One of the underlying questions that would bubble up to the surface by the end of the decade concerned what being “Reformed” meant to the PCA as its missions programs grew and the denomination approached the year 2000.

The closing years of the 1990s were significant for the PCA as the denomination continued to grow numerically and mature into a settled identity and praxis. At the 26th General Assembly in 1998, the PCA elected its third Stated Clerk, and founding father Dr. L. Roy Taylor stepped into the role as Dr. Gilchrist's successor. Dr. Taylor brought an unprecedented degree of stability and administrative professionalism to the position, ably serving well into the 21st century. The final General Assembly of the decade was relatively uneventful, though in retrospect, certain actions taken by the 26th and 27th Assemblies portended important developments in the PCA's identity to-come in the opening decades of the new millennium.

The 26th General Assembly erected an “Advisory Committee” to examine various interpretations of the Bible's account of God's creation of the world “in/within the space of six days”³² and to advise the Assembly as to how best to understand and evaluate the several views most common among PCA elders. The impetus for the creation of what became known as the “Creation Study Committee” was a hotly debated case decided by the SJC and—in a rare instance—voted upon by the Assembly. Over the course of two years, the Committee advised the denomination that while four views on creation—the so-called Calendar Day, Day-Age, Analogical Day, and Framework Hypothesis views—could be deemed acceptable (at the discretion of each individual presbytery), any view countenancing some theory of theistic evolution is to be ruled out of accord with the PCA's doctrinal Standards (M28GA, pp. 119–212). No presbytery since the adoption of the committee's report has approved a man for ordained office who holds to the theory of molecules-to-man or theistic evolution.

In a significant move, the 27th General Assembly clarified to the Church (and to the world) how to determine the official identity of the PCA. This decision addressed a decade-long contest over the denomination's identity. Since the late 1980s, a group known as

29. For brief, but illuminating, commentary on issues facing MTW and the 18th and 19th General Assemblies which opened the decade, see Hall, *Irony and the Presbyterian Church in America*, pp. 133f, 158f, 189–191.

30. Hall, *Irony and the Presbyterian Church in America*, pp. 246f.

31. Paul Kooistra, “From the Coordinator: Missions with a Capital ‘R,’” *Network* 12, no. 2 (Fall 1994): 8.

32. WCF 4.1, WLC 15, WSC 9.

the Vision 2000 Caucus had rallied the interests of an ambitious and influential subset of the PCA.³³ In response to this caucus, a smaller group calling itself the Concerned Presbyterians (adopting the name of one of the four groups that organized the initial formation of the PCA) began activities to advocate for a more truly Reformed expression of Presbyterianism in the PCA. In 1999, the General Assembly formally settled the question of who—or what—defined the identity of the PCA in rejecting the Vision 2000 Caucus “Statement of Identity” circulated in 1995. The Assembly approved the following:

The Presbyterian Church in America affirms that the only binding statement identifying this denomination is the Constitution of the Church as defined in the Preface of the *Book of Church Order*, Section III. All other statements are simply individual statements of opinions and are to carry no authority nor to be binding guides to practice within the churches, committees and courts of the church.³⁴

Though affinity networks, secret caucuses, and well-meaning public groups will come and go with their particular platforms, agendas, and hopes for the PCA, the official statement of the Church’s identity is contained in one place: the Church’s published Constitution. The following year, the 28th General Assembly elected Dr. Morton H. Smith as Moderator, and the body received the *Report of the Creation Study Committee* with thanks and appreciation, shoring up one aspect of the Church’s denominational identity while also leaving open to the presbyteries how best to enact the Committee’s recommendations.³⁵

By 2000, the PCA had grown to 1,206 congregations, 58 presbyteries, and 299,055 members.³⁶ By 2002, the PCA’s college ministry Reformed University Fellowship (RUF) matured to the point of having its own Assembly-elected board apart from Mission to North America (MNA), which had stewarded this important outreach and discipleship ministry of the Church since its founding by Teaching Elder Mark Lowrey (1945–2023) on the campus of the University of Southern Mississippi in 1973. With such remarkable numerical growth since 1973 (nearly six times as many churches and approaching eight times as many members), the PCA certainly appeared to be maintaining obedience to the Great Commission as a Presbyterian and Reformed denomination with a commitment to evangelism, missions, the inerrancy of Scripture, and ecclesiastical order. At the same time, such rapid expansion invited predictable problems

of maintaining both the theological integrity of a fast-growing church and the all-important humility of a truly Christian body.

Between 2000 and 2003, situations in local churches and circumstances in the surrounding culture tested the PCA’s humble submission to Scripture and the body’s unity of practice as a denomination in two important areas. These tests have had long-lasting ramifications on the subsequent life of the Church. In the first place, the denomination had to address an increasingly insistent push for the expansion of women’s involvement in public worship and teaching in mixed groups of men and women. As the PCA reaffirmed its biblically reasoned commitment to male-only ordination, worship leadership, and adult instruction in the Church, it came under fire from those taking an egalitarian position on the issue. From this point forward, the most significant (but certainly not all) ministerial and congregational transfers out of the PCA made their moves after coming to settled egalitarian convictions. These departing brethren typically left for some form of independency or theologically egalitarian Presbyterianism (e.g. the Evangelical Presbyterian Church).

Around the same time, the General Assembly in the years straddling the turn of the century heard repeated calls to condemn the involvement of women in combat roles with the nation’s armed forces. After the al-Qaeda terrorist attacks of 9/11 instigated the United States’ global war on terror in 2001, the Church’s position on the fundamentally moral issue of women’s roles in war became more important. Deliberations on the issue paralleled the Church’s fierce debate over women’s roles in worship and teaching. One important result of

33. For fair-minded, but critical, descriptions of the Vision 2000 Caucus and its activities, see Jared Nelson, “Secret Caucuses & the PCA,” Presbyterian Polity (blog), January 28, 2022, <https://pcapolity.com/2022/01/28/secret-caucuses/>; see also, Frank J. Smith, *The History of the Presbyterian Church in America: Silver Anniversary Edition* (Lawrenceville, GA: Presbyterian Scholars Press, 1999), p. 460; Paul Settle, *To God All Praise and Glory* (Atlanta, GA: 25th Anniversary Celebration Committee of the Presbyterian Church in America, 1998), p. 61; Hall, *Irony and the Presbyterian Church in America*, pp. 237–45.

34. M27GA, p. 173; quoted in Hall, *Irony and the Presbyterian Church in America*, p. 284.

35. Note that even when recognized and received by the General Assembly, study committee reports are merely *in thesi* deliverances communicating pious advice. They are not constitutionally binding. For more on this subject, see C. N. Willborn, “The ‘Ministerial and Declarative’ Powers of the Church and *In Thesi* Deliverances,” *The Confessional Presbyterian* 1 (2005): 94–101.

36. Note that total membership is inclusive of communicant members, non-communing covenant children, and ordained ministers, M28GA, p. 353.

these deliberations about women serving in the military was the PCA's official declaration of support for "the decision of any of its members to object to, as a matter of conscience, the conscription of women or the use of women as military combatants" (*M30GA*, p. 286).

In the second place, the PCA at the Assembly level began to turn its attention to an old issue that had become more pressing in light of the debate over creation views. At the very end of the PCA's second decade, formal considerations of confessional subscription began to take shape as organized speeches and published arguments from those describing themselves as advocates of either strict (full) or loose (system) subscription.³⁷ At the 20th General Assembly in 1992, Dr. Morton H. Smith (full) and Dr. William S. Barker (system) presented the opposing views in a cordial presentation-and-response format. These occasions were in response to ongoing conversation following inconclusive General Assembly deliberations in the years after J&R.

In 1995, Dr. David W. Hall brought together a diverse group of contributors for a book of essays entitled *The Practice of Confessional Subscription* to compile various views into one published volume.³⁸ In 2003, Dr. Smith published a thick pamphlet entitled *Holding Fast to the Faith: A Brief History of Subscription to Creeds & Confessions with Particular Reference to Presbyterian Churches*, including a chapter on "The Presbyterian Church and Subscription," indicating that the discussion had not passed into obscurity over the intervening years.³⁹ In this booklet, the first Stated Clerk of the PCA bemoaned the 30th General Assembly's adoption of a new position on confessional subscription in 2002, convened once more at Briarwood Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, AL (this was the last time an Assembly was held in a church-owned facility). At this Assembly, the PCA passed a constitutional amendment to incorporate "Good Faith Subscription" into BCO 21 containing the subscription vow which candidates to gospel ministry swear upon their ordination as Teaching Elders (*M30GA*, pp. 212f, 218–238).⁴⁰ Under these

terms, accepted by the requisite 2/3 majority of the presbyteries and ratified by the 31st General Assembly the following year, the PCA formally approved the adoption of 'Good Faith Subscription.'

Under the PCA's terms of "Good Faith Subscription" proposed at the close of the Church's third decade and ratified at the opening of its fourth, a candidate standing for ordination in or transfer into a presbytery of the PCA may declare his differences (if he has any) with the doctrinal Standards of the Church and profess that he holds to all remaining material in "Good Faith." Thus, such a candidate adopts the system, though with some declared differences. It is then incumbent upon the examining body (i.e., the presbytery) to determine whether the candidate's stated differences are merely formal (i.e., scruples with how a doctrine is expressed), truly substantial (i.e., disagreements with a doctrine), or immaterial (i.e., no actual difference). If a presbytery determines that the candidate holds a substantial difference with a doctrine contained in the Standards of the Church, then the presbytery must judge whether or not the declared difference is "out of accord with any fundamental of our system of doctrine" (*BCO* 21–4.g).

In one sense, the adoption of "Good Faith Subscription" meant that the PCA incorporated into its constitution the expectation that all candidates will hold to the entirety of the doctrinal Standards of the Church in "Good Faith." In another sense, the PCA has reduced its confessional standard to an undefined system of "fundamentals" determined on an *ad hoc* basis by the various regional presbyteries of the denomination. In terms of historical reflection, Dr. Smith astutely drew the connection between the early 20th century Fundamentalists' principled platform of reducing creedal Protestantism to five fundamentals to the PCA's formal adoption of "Good Faith Subscription" in the early 21st century. He then responded, "May God graciously guard us from the errors of our forefathers, which lowered the doctrinal standards of the Church, and ultimately resulted in schism in the Church."⁴¹ With the ratification of "Good Faith Subscription" in 2003, the PCA formalized its fundamentalist identity inherited from the RPCES in 1983, bringing into question its founders' stated aspiration to be "intensely Presbyterian" published in 1973.

2004–2013: A UNIFIED CHURCH IN FRACTURED TIMES

The PCA found itself at something of a crossroads going into its fourth decade. While it seemed that the difficult contests over confessional subscription, creation views, and denominational identity had found

37. For the relative merits and rationale for the use of these admittedly imprecise terms, see Morton H. Smith, *The Subscription Debate: Studies in Presbyterian Polity* (Greenville, SC: Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, n.d.), esp. pp. 5–7, 12–15, 17f.

38. David W. Hall, ed., *The Practice of Confessional Subscription* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1995).

39. Morton H. Smith, *Holding Fast to the Faith: A Brief History of Subscription to Creeds & Confessions with Particular Reference to Presbyterian Churches* (Brevard, NC: presbyterianintegrity.org, 2003), pp. 54–68.

40. See Hall, *Irony and the Presbyterian Church in America*, p. 302.

41. Smith, *Holding Fast to the Faith*, p. 68.

reasonable resolution, the times were rapidly changing. Would the Church be able to maintain a unified scriptural witness while also enjoying numerical growth? What would it take to be united in obedience to the Great Commission in the 21st century? Did the flexibility promised (and honesty promoted) by “Good Faith Subscription” represent progress toward a more transparently Reformed and confessional American Presbyterianism? Or did such innovations introduce even greater confusion into the Church’s navigation of theological developments in American Christianity?

More intensely than at any point in the first 30 years of the PCA’s history, the Church’s first full decade in the new millennium tested the unity of what Sean Michael Lucas has judiciously termed “a conservative mainline Protestant body in a postdenominational world.”⁴² Online weblogs (hereafter referred to simply as “blogs”) took on an increasingly important role in the dissemination of information and hashing out of theological controversy across the denomination and into broader evangelicalism. Established organizations such as the PCA’s joint publishing house with the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) named Great Commission Publications (GCP), Ligonier Ministries founded by Dr. R. C. Sproul, Sr. (1939–2017), the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals founded by Dr. James Montgomery Boice (1938–2000), Evangelism Explosion founded by Dr. D. James Kennedy (1930–2007),⁴³ and Third Millennium Ministries under the leadership of Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr. developed new means of reaching church leaders and church members alike. Around the world, more people were discovering biblical Christianity through traditional and non-traditional media as a result of PCA ministers’ creative publishing efforts, sometimes undertaken in partnership with colleagues outside of the denomination.

Churches and individuals committed to Reformed theology (as well as adherents of every other theological creed, philosophical position, or hastily concocted opinion known to man) had new avenues for rapid distribution of their beliefs in the technology age. It was during this time that the so-called “Young, Restless, and Reformed” (YRR)⁴⁴ movement swept through American Christianity, cutting across denominational boundaries with input from and effect upon the PCA. Pastor and author Dr. Kevin DeYoung even maintained a blog with The Gospel Coalition entitled “DeYoung, Restless, and Reformed” which ran on the TGC platform from January 24, 2009⁴⁵ until a post announcing the creation of a new site (without the clever play on his name and the YRR movement) on March 7, 2022.⁴⁶ But the YRR movement was simply that: an organic, unorganized,

and impossible-to-contain *movement* of those with a loosely construed affinity for certain Reformed theological distinctives. While parachurch organizations like TGC could provide a platform for expression and exploration, the church alone could provide an institutional vehicle for young believers to express their newfound Reformed convictions and commitment to Reformed worship.

Concurrent to the YRR phenomenon, interest in the ministries of the PCA grew alongside attraction to Reformed theology. For example, Collin Hansen reported on RUF in his 2008 book *Young, Restless, and Reformed: A Journalist’s Journey with the New Calvinists*, “I tagged along with RUF to learn about the Reformed approach to college ministry... RUF attracts a unique blend of students.... But if they stick with RUF, they’re sure to get a heavy dose of Reformed theology, starting with the Westminster Confession.”⁴⁷ From 2004 to 2013, the PCA’s presence on American college campuses expanded from 89 campuses (*M33GA*, p. 636) to over 145 campuses in 39 states and 60 presbyteries (*M42GA*, p. 298). The college ministry of the PCA increasingly became a port-of-entry into the denomination, both for church members and future ministers. In the same period, Mission to North America (MNA) would report in 2014 that from 2004 through 2013, the organization placed an average of one new church planter into the field every week (*M42GA*, p. 235).

Before the end of the PCA’s fourth decade, the Church grappled at the denominational level with long-lasting and significant theological debates surrounding matters as centrally important as the place of sanctification in the Christian life, ecclesiology, and missiology (i.e., what it looks like to be obedient to the Great Commission). DeYoung noted that the challenges related to these issues convinced him to care less about the future

42. Sean Michael Lucas, *For a Continuing Church: The Roots of the Presbyterian Church in America*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 2015), p. 327.

43. It is worth noting that Dr. Sproul, Dr. Boice, and Dr. Kennedy (among other PCA ministers) were original signatories on the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* in the fall of 1978.

44. Collin Hansen coined this phrase in his September 22, 2006 article “Young, Restless, Reformed: Calvinism is making a comeback—and shaking up the church,” published in *Christianity Today*.

45. Kevin DeYoung, “Like a Hole in the Head,” The Gospel Coalition (blog), January 24, 2009, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/like-hole-in-head/>.

46. Kevin DeYoung, “A New (Old) Blog,” The Gospel Coalition (blog), March 7, 2022, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/a-new-old-blog/>.

47. Collin Hansen, *Young, Restless, and Reformed: A Journalist’s Journey with the New Calvinists* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), p. 64.

of the YRR “label” and instead to give more attention to “the committees, assemblies, and machinery of the church.”⁴⁸ Between 2004 and 2013, study committees and intradenominational groups addressed each of these areas in different ways.

The 34th General Assembly held in Atlanta, GA in 2006 was notable for several reasons. In the first place, it elected Teaching Elder Dr. Dominic Aquila, a longtime denominational newsman, theological educator, and devoted PCA churchman as Moderator. In the second place, the Assembly appointed a committee to look into how best to make the business of the Assembly more efficient. This committee’s work led to the creation of the Cooperative Ministries Committee (CMC) and adjustments to reporting mechanisms for the denomination.⁴⁹ This Assembly also appointed a committee to study a nebulous theological trend known as the Federal Vision. Among other things, proponents of the Federal Vision promoted a view of Scripture and biblical theology derived from the New Perspective on Paul, particularly as mediated through the writings of Anglican bishop and scholar N. T. Wright. Popularized in large measure by Dr. Peter Leithart (a PCA minister in the Pacific Northwest Presbytery at the time) and Moscow, Idaho-based pastor and author Doug Wilson, the Federal Vision movement was difficult to define. Its relatively small group of vocal supporters covered a broad spectrum of adherents united by two things: opposition to moral laxity in American culture, and a commitment to administering communion to all baptized members of the church, regardless of age or mental competence.⁵⁰

The 35th General Assembly held in Memphis, TN in 2007 received the *Report of the Ad Interim Study Committee on Federal Vision, New Perspective, and Auburn Avenue Theologies*, defending a biblical and historically Presbyterian understanding of justification (*M35GA*, pp. 68f, 509–567). During the floor deliberation over the Assembly’s reception of the *Report*, no less a figure than Dr. R. C. Sproul, Sr. rose to speak against a procedural motion to postpone accepting the critical findings

of the *Report* and to add Federal Vision proponents to the committee for their perspective, and thus arguing in favor of effectively ruling the Federal Vision to be theology out of bounds in relation to the PCA. Sproul’s colleague, biographer, and fellow PCA Teaching Elder Stephen J. Nichols records the content of the speech:

Yes, R. C. Sproul, Central Florida Presbytery, speaking against the motion. I think we’re all aware of Luther’s evaluation of the doctrine of justification where he says it was the article upon which the church stands or falls. Calvin added to that, “It’s the hinge upon which everything turns.” And in our day, we’ve had an unprecedented attack on the Reformation understanding of *Sola Fide*, particularly at the point of the denial of imputation, which, if you look at the declarations, you see is front and center of this report. And I believe, fathers and brethren, that the Kingdom of God is not at stake here, but I think the purity of the PCA is, and I don’t understand—I just can’t fathom—the hesitancy about this matter. Too much is at stake, this is the *gospel* we’re talking about, gentlemen. And if the Westminster Confession does not already give us a faithful exposition of the *gospel*, at what point can we trust our Confession? And it seems to me to add these people to the committee, whom our previous committee, fulfilling their mandate to examine whether their views weren’t conforming to our confession, is like asking in a courtroom to have the accused become members of the jury. It just doesn’t make any sense to me.⁵¹

In addition to the PCA’s *Report* rejecting the Federal Vision, sister denominations in the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC) published similar reports denouncing the aberrant theological movement. While controversy over Federal Vision and its various permutations and varieties continues to fester below the surface in Reformed churches around the country, the PCA and like-minded denominations maintain strong and public opposition to its errors.

At the same time, vocal opponents to the Federal Vision theology raised concerns about another soteriology heresy: Antinomianism. Finding modulated expression in certain streams of so-called ‘Sonship Theology’ based on curriculum developed by Dr. C. John Miller (1928–1996), Antinomianism severely attenuates—if not outright rejects—any lasting prescriptive use of the moral law of God for living the Christian life. This approach regards sanctification’s ‘dying to sin and living to righteousness’⁵² as merely meditating upon the forensic results of justification. By rejecting the Reformed ‘third

48. Kevin DeYoung, “Whither YRR?” The Gospel Coalition (blog), December 20, 2011, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevinyoung/whither-yrr/>.

49. Hall, *Irony and the Presbyterian Church in America*, pp. 324–330.

50. For a thorough presentation of opposing views on the Federal Vision, see E. Calvin Beisner, ed., *The Auburn Avenue Theology Pros & Cons: Debating the Federal Vision* (Fort Lauderdale, FL: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004).

51. Transcribed in Stephen J. Nichols, *R. C. Sproul: A Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), pp. 241f.

52. This phrase is adapted from the answer found in Westminster Shorter Catechism 35.

use' of God's moral law, Antinomians neglect the pursuit of holy living in mystical union with the risen Christ.

From within the PCA, outspoken critics of Antinomianism and Sonship Theology at this time included some of the same men who took the lead in combatting the Federal Vision. Dr. Richard D. Phillips of Second Presbyterian Church in Greenville, SC not only openly critiqued the Federal Vision,⁵³ but also participated in the 2012 formation of the Gospel Reformation Network (GRN) with the express intent to promote the PCA's confessional understanding of the doctrines of progressive sanctification and perseverance for the church's ministry.⁵⁴ Dr. J. Ligon Duncan, III who served as Senior Minister of First Presbyterian Church in Jackson, MS and President of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals during this time, championed the use of the Westminster Standards, biblical Reformed worship, and the importance of the doctrine of sanctification for the life of the church; he also participated in the formation of the GRN. By the end of the PCA's third decade, Dr. Duncan would become Chancellor and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Reformed Theological Seminary. One founding minister of the denomination, Dr. Joseph A. Pipa, Jr., then-serving as President of Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary (GPTS), which began hosting a popular annual theology conference during his tenure, similarly opposed the Federal Vision⁵⁵ while promoting Reformed piety for all of life. At the 2002 GPTS Spring Theology Conference, Dr. Pipa declared, "Biblical Presbyterianism is not merely a system of thinking, but always has included an approach to living. There is a Reformed piety that springs directly from Reformed thinking."⁵⁶ Debates over other practical matters pertaining to the ecclesiology and missiology of the PCA resulted in a second study committee report worth noting in this period of the denomination's history.

Being obedient to the Great Commission means nothing less than heeding Christ's command to "make disciples of all the nations" (Matt. 28:19). However, the nature of discipleship has proven to be a perennial matter of discussion in evangelical and Reformed churches. This was certainly the case in the PCA as it dealt with Insider Movements (IMs) in foreign mission fields. Representing a variety of approaches to ministry in cultures dominated by historically, socially, and culturally entrenched religions, IMs discourage the use of traditional Christian familial language to describe God as Father and Son. They also generally encourage Christian converts to retain their positions and socio-religious identities within the communities from which they are

converting. Missiologist and Teaching Elder Dr. David B. Garner of Westminster Theological Seminary, who chaired the PCA's Study Committee on Insider Movements appointed following the 39th General Assembly in 2011 wrote, "It is fair to say that most IM advocates intend that these *remaining* and *retaining* insiders not simply carry on their cultural and religious practices unthinkingly, but do so with an eye toward recasting these religions" and evangelizing those still adhering to their former religious commitments.⁵⁷

While charitably judging the intentions of IM proponents, the study committee over the course of three years nonetheless demonstrated that the ramifications of IMs on theological vocabulary, Bible translation, and the church's understanding of both conversion and discipleship are devastating. At the 42nd General Assembly in 2014, the PCA formally denied the compatibility of IMs with biblically faithful discipleship practices and theological expression (*M42GA*, pp. 21, 603), pushing into the fifth decade of the denomination's history with a significant statement on what it means to be obedient to the Great Commission. To be obedient to the Great Commission anywhere, the PCA must be consistent and resolute in remaining faithful to the Scriptures and true to the Reformed Faith everywhere.

2014–2023: *ECCLESIA REFORMATA, SEMPER REFORMANDA*

Before considering the last decade of the PCA's ongoing history, it is necessary to recall important theological framing left as-yet unacknowledged in this study. The provenance of the PCA's motto—"Faithful to the Scriptures, True to the Reformed Faith, Obedient to the Great Commission"—is somewhat uncertain, with the most likely source of the sentiment expressed therein being the lead article of the March 1965 issue of *The*

53. See contributions in Beisner, ed., *The Auburn Avenue Theology Pros & Cons*.

54. Jon D. Payne, "The Gospel Reformation Network: For the Continued Faithfulness of the PCA," Gospel Reformation Network (blog), March 9, 2017, <https://gospelreformation.net/the-gospel-reformation-network-a-new-vision-for-continued-faithfulness-in-the-pca/>.

55. Joseph A. Pipa, Jr., "Auburn Avenue Theology: An Overview of Critics' Concerns," in *The Auburn Avenue Theology Pros & Cons*, ed. Beisner, pp. 9–17.

56. Joseph A. Pipa, Jr., "The Sabbath and Reformed Piety," in *Reformed Spirituality: Communing with our Glorious God*, ed. Joseph A. Pipa, Jr. & J. Andrew Wortman (Greenville, SC: Southern Presbyterian Press, 2003), p. 101.

57. David B. Garner, "High Stakes: Insider Movement Hermeneutics and the Gospel," *Themelios* 37, no. 2 (2012): 250. N.B. Garner serves as a member of the GRN Executive Council.

Concerned Presbyterian Bulletin edited by Ruling Elder Kenneth S. Keyes, Sr. (1896–1995).⁵⁸ In that lead article, the author (presumably Mr. Keyes) wrote the following about the aims of the men promoting renewal and reformation in the PCUS:

This is the avowed purpose to endeavor to return the control of our Church once more to those who believe that the Bible is the Word of God and the only infallible rule of faith and practice, that unswerving loyalty to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms is vital and essential to the work of our Church, and that leading the unsaved to Christ and nurturing believers in the Faith should take precedence even over every other proper activity in the Church's program.⁵⁹

This initial expression of the three values included in the PCA's motto captures an important truth that has been tested again and again in the denomination's half-century history. You cannot divide the three values and set them against one another. They are utterly interdependent.

For any church to be Reformed, it must continually be reforming according to God's Word. For the church to be obedient to the Great Commission entrusted to it by the Lord, it must maintain fidelity to the whole counsel of God "contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments" (WSC 2). Whatever else it may mean for the church to be 'Reformed,' it at the very least entails being true to the conviction that the Reformed Faith is the full-orbed biblical Christianity which Christ commanded to be published abroad among every tribe, and in every tongue, under heaven. It is simply incorrect to assert that a church or group can be more committed to biblical fidelity, Reformed theology, or practical missions without being more earnest about all three values at once.

With the last decade of the PCA's current history having just concluded, any conclusions drawn about

trends and trajectories are at best provisional and will stand judgement by tomorrow's more clear-eyed church historians. Yet there is a story of hopeful renewal and reformation worth telling amid the debates and exogenous shocks of these most recent years. In a decade when evangelical Christians in North America have faced renewed hostility from the surrounding culture and society—what one observer has called "The Negative World"⁶⁰—the PCA has maintained its witness as an evangelical and Reformed denomination committed to historic confessional and biblical Presbyterianism, but not without difficulty.

During this time, the PCA continued to play host to opposing sub-groups and affinity networks hoping to realize divergent goals for the conduct of ministry in and across the denomination. Through a series of important studies and decisions at the Assembly level, what emerged over time was a reaffirmation of the Church's biblical commitments and uniquely—if not 'intensely'—Presbyterian method of maintaining obedience to the Great Commission. In what follows, four of these studies and three Assembly decisions in particular merit attention.

In 2016, the CMC recommended to the 44th General Assembly that the body authorize the moderator to "form a study committee on women serving in the ministry of the church" (*M44GA*, p. 58). After pointed debate raised by Teaching Elder Dr. David Coffin as to the propriety of the CMC bringing such a recommendation before the body, the Assembly approved the formation of the study committee (*M44GA*, pp. 51–56). The next year, the committee reported back to the 45th General Assembly, putting forward a positive stance on women being actively involved in the life of the Church and formally employed in appropriate local church and denominational ministry staff positions. However, the committee and its report held fast to the biblical position that ordained service in the Church is reserved for qualified men. Though some other Presbyterian bodies ordain women as deaconesses, deacons, elders, and even pastors, the PCA would not join their ranks in this flagrant violation of the biblical requirements for ordination. By and large, the PCA would maintain the *status quo*.

The committee did put forward a series of recommendations, including two that are worth highlighting as examples of how this study committee sought to clarify certain existing practices in the PCA. In a stroke of creativity, the committee recommended "That presbyteries and the General Assembly consider an overture that would establish formally the right of sessions,

58. Among his many important contributions to the beginning, well-being, and growth of the PCA, Keyes procured and donated the land upon which the Ridge Haven Retreat Center sits in Brevard, North Carolina.

59. "Why We Are 'Concerned,'" *The Concerned Presbyterian Bulletin* (March 1965); see Wayne Sparkman, "September 6: 'Faithful to the Scriptures, true to the Reformed faith, and obedient to the Great Commission,'" *This Day in Presbyterian History: Daily devotional readings in Scripture, the Westminster Standards, & Presbyterian history*, September 6, 2017, <https://thisday.pcahistory.org/2017/09/September-6-4/>; also, Sean Michael Lucas, *For a Continuing Church*, pp. 253f.

60. Aaron Renn, "The Three Worlds of Evangelicalism," *First Things* (February 2022): 25–31.

presbyteries, and the General Assembly to establish the position of commissioned church worker within the PCA for qualified and gifted unordained men and women” (*M45GA*, p. 642). This innovative verbiage prompted noted scholar and author Dr. Chad Van Dixhoorn to introduce his fraternal address to this Assembly with the salutation, “I bring you greetings as a commissioned church worker of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.”⁶¹ The committee also sagely exhorted sessions of local churches to “if possible, establish a diaconate of qualified ordained men” (*M45GA*, p. 639). The committee made this recommendation in response to concerns that some churches in the denomination were refusing to ordain deacons, opting instead to form and maintain teams made up of unordained men and women entrusted with the duties biblically reserved to ordained deacons.

The following year, the 46th General Assembly, skillfully moderated by Teaching Elder Dr. Irwyn L. Ince, Jr., heard from a study committee formed in 2016 to address the issues of racism and racial reconciliation. The committee’s report in 2018 by no means initiated a new conversation in the PCA. Though the denomination was founded with an explicit invitation for all people—regardless of social, cultural, ethnic, or economic background—to participate fully in the worship and work of the church, the effectiveness of the PCA’s intentional efforts at cross-cultural ministry have been lackluster, at best. Matters pertaining to what NAPARC addressed as “race relations”⁶² had been long-lasting concerns. How to close gaps in communion and communication between groups, however, presented a puzzle of existential importance for a church committed to being obedient to the Great Commission. The committee proceeded in its work under guiding principles affirming the unity of mankind in one race of God’s image-bearers and rejecting approaches dependent on anti-Christian philosophies such as theological liberalism, Marxism, Socialism, “intersectionality,” or other views incorporating racial superiority as a constituent feature (*M46GA*, p. 599). An important ramification of the committee’s work is the PCA’s formal rejection of controversial critical theories derived from Marxism, including Critical Race Theory. Though Mainline Protestantism had capitulated to Leftist ideologies many decades ago, and shrill voices in the broader culture were calling on Christians to take social or political positions at odds with the Bible’s clear presentation of mankind’s shared dignity as being created “in the image of God” (Gen. 1:27), the PCA would disciple the nations in submission to “the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture” (WCF 1.10).

That same year, the PCA had to address a controversy sparked by the inaugural Revoice Conference hosted by Memorial Presbyterian Church in St. Louis, MO. Claiming to promote an historically Christian sexual ethic while dignifying the struggles and peculiar giftings of professing Christians with homosexual erotic desires, the Revoice Conference enjoyed close partnership with and support from Memorial Presbyterian Church and its Senior Pastor Dr. Greg Johnson. The original stated mission of the conference was, “supporting, encouraging, and empowering gay, lesbian, same-sex attracted, and other LGBT Christians so they can flourish while observing the historic, Christian doctrine of marriage and sexuality.”⁶³ In addition to hosting the Revoice Conference, Memorial had regularly (since 2007) hosted theater groups, musicians, and visual artists through its exhibition and performance venue called “The Chapel.”⁶⁴ Apart from Memorial’s membership in the PCA, the partnership between the church and Revoice seemed to make perfect sense.

Controversy swirled around the conflict between Revoice’s apparent refusal to identify same-sex sexual attraction as inherently sinful and the PCA’s biblical and theological commitments in the area of hamartiology, or doctrine of sin. Summarizing the Bible’s teaching about sins of the heart, the Westminster Larger Catechism includes among the sins forbidden in the seventh commandment “all unnatural lusts,” “all unclean imaginations, thoughts, purposes, and affections,” “light behavior, immodest apparel,” “entangling vows of single life, undue delay of marriage,” lascivious songs, books, pictures, dancings, stage plays,” and “all other provocations to, or acts of uncleanness, either in ourselves and others,” among other items (WLC 139). Whereas

61. Chad Van Dixhoorn, “PCA GA 2017 Wed PM Business,” 45th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, Joseph S. Koury Convention Center (Greensboro, NC), filmed June 14, 2017, Video of business, 27:49–27:54, <https://vimeo.com/843025798>.

62. “NAPARC Statement on Race Relations (1977), from the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC) Conference on Race Relations, March 24–25, 1977,” PCA Historical Center, accessed December 28, 2023, <https://pcahistory.org/topical/race/NAPARC1977.html>, accessed December 28, 2023.

63. Mark Galli, “Revoice’s Founder Answers the LGBT Conference’s Critics: Orientation is not necessarily sexual, Nate Collins says,” *Christianity Today* (blog), July 25, 2018, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/july-web-only/revoices-founder-answers-lgbt-conferences-critics.html>.

64. Carolyn Curtis, “Goin’ to The Chapel: A Sanctuary for the Arts,” *byFaith* (blog), December 1, 2008, <https://byfaithonline.com/goin-to-the-chapel-a-sanctuary-for-the-arts/>; see also, Zachary Groff, “Trans Memorial in an Evangelical Chapel?,” *reformation21* (blog), March 6, 2020, <https://reformation21.org/blog/trans-memorial-in-an-evangelical-chapel/>.

the Revoice Conference encouraged those struggling with same-sex sexual desire to channel their unique affections in service to the church as celibates—or, “Side B Gay Christians”—critics of the Conference and its agenda upheld the power of God’s regenerating and sanctifying Spirit in the life of the Christian. The GRN, with its emphasis on the doctrine of sanctification for the ministry of the PCA, played a leading role in opposing the influence of the Revoice Conference and its leaders on the denomination.

In 2019, the 47th General Assembly—after much debate—approved a motion from Calvary Presbytery and presented by GRN Executive Council member and Ruling Elder Melton L. Duncan, Sr. to recognize the 2017 *Nashville Statement* relating to human sexuality and gender roles as a biblically faithful declaration (*M47GA*, p. 76). Subsequently, the Assembly passed a motion directing Moderator Howie Donahoe to appoint a study committee on human sexuality (*M47GA*, p. 77). This same Assembly created a study committee on domestic abuse and sexual assault (*M47GA*, p. 79) which would report its findings to the 49th General Assembly in 2022 (*M49GA*, pp. 949–1266). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the 48th General Assembly was postponed to 2021, at which point the Church received the report of the human sexuality study committee. This highly anticipated report reaffirmed the PCA’s stance on biblical sexuality, settling any dispute over the inherent sinfulness of desire for that which is sinful. The report reads, “We affirm that impure thoughts and desires arising in us prior to and apart from a conscious act of the will are still sin. We reject the Roman Catholic understanding of concupiscence whereby disordered desires that afflict us due to the Fall do not become sin without a consenting act of the will” (*M48GA*, p. 880).

After another two years of debate, the 50th General Assembly passed a proposed amendment to the *BCO* regarding officer qualifications. The new language makes clear and specific demands of each church officer and officer candidate in the PCA: “sexual purity in his descriptions of himself, and in his convictions, character, and conduct.” In accord with procedures for amending the *BCO*, this additional language will go into effect in 2024 only after receiving the approval of at least 2/3 of

the 88 regional presbyteries of the denomination and a final majority vote by the 51st General Assembly. However, with the evident popularity of the proposal, most observers (and presbyters) believe that the intense debates over human sexuality are largely settled in the past.

Amid the furor over the hot-button issues discussed above, the PCA accepted the retirement of Stated Clerk Dr. L. Roy Taylor at the 48th General Assembly in 2021 and approved the uncontested election of Dr. Bryan Chapell as his successor. Dr. Chapell previously served as President of Covenant Theological Seminary and is the author of several popular books on preaching, worship, and other matters pertaining to practical theology.

To round out the final section of this historical survey, some observations about revitalized vigor among the grassroots of the PCA over the last five years are appropriate.

In late 2021, email correspondence among a group of PCA elders (mostly Teaching Elders serving in various capacities across the denomination) calling itself the “National Partnership” came into public view. It became clear from these emails that members of a secret group operating within the denomination regarded themselves as stewards of the majority interest in the Church, an interest explicitly opposed to men aligned with the GRN, supportive of the *Nashville Statement*, or critical of theologically progressive influences on the Church.⁶⁵

The controversy ignited by the Revoice Conference and aggravated by revelations of a secret partisan caucus operating across the denomination catalyzed an increase of conservative Ruling Elder participation in the courts of the Church and a renewed interest in the procedures and processes of the historic polity of the PCA. Signs of this renewal of interest in denominational happenings (frequently reported upon by Ruling Elder Brad Isbell of the *Presbycast* podcast) included mobilization efforts by new groups, such as the Ruling Elder Network and MORE in the PCA,⁶⁶ the latter of which began subsidizing the cost of Ruling Elder participation in General Assembly in 2018.⁶⁷ Another group of polity-minded presbyters (including the author of this historical survey) launched an electronic and print media publishing outlet for resources on biblical church government called *Presbyterian Polity* in 2021. Over the last five years, the grassroots have sprung up to new life. As mentioned above, three General Assembly actions are worth highlighting as evidence confirming the energetic recovery of the PCA’s “grassroots Presbyterianism.”

In 2021, the 48th General Assembly adopted a motion to revise the MTW Policy Manual such that the following statement would be included: “All MTW leaders in

65. Todd Pruitt, “Making Sausage with the National Partnership,” *reformation21* (blog), November 1, 2021, <https://www.reformation21.org/blog/making-sausage-with-the-national-partnership/>.

66. MORE stands for ‘More Orthodox Ruling Elders.’

67. For more information on this trend, see Brad Isbell, “Ruling Elder Renaissance,” *Presbyterian Polity* (blog), June 20, 2023, <https://pcapolity.com/2023/06/20/ruling-elder-renaissance/>.

line authority over church planting or church development ministry shall be ordained elders” (M48GA, p. 58, 979). This had far-reaching consequences for the administration of MTW, which had employed unordained supervisors over ordained ministers in the mission field for some time, in similar fashion to many parachurch missions agencies around the world. Though opposed strenuously by the Executive Director of MTW Dr. Lloyd Kim—who argued that the precedent of the General Assembly forcing a change on a Permanent Committee’s Policy Manual would be “potentially dangerous” to the effective operation of the ministry of MTW—the proposed change passed. In the course of the debate, both Teaching Elder Rick Gray speaking as the Chairman of the Committee of Commissioners which brought the substitute motion in place of the Permanent Committee’s recommendation and Teaching Elder Dr. David Coffin appealed to the PCA’s historic polity. Chairman Gray touted in his speech the importance of “elder rule” by Christ’s divine appointment in the church and its ministry, and Dr. Coffin referred to BCO 14–1.7, which states that “The Assembly’s committees are to serve and not to direct any Church judicatories. They are not to establish policy, but rather execute policy established by the General Assembly.” These arguments not only comported with the PCA’s “grassroots Presbyterianism,” but also won the day, demonstrating that the Permanent Committees are answerable to the General Assembly comprised of the duly ordained and commissioned elders of the Church.⁶⁸

In 2022, the 49th General Assembly revisited an issue that had last come before the body three years earlier at the 47th General Assembly: leaving the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE). Whereas a motion to leave the NAE failed at the 47th Assembly by a vote of 590–845 (M47GA, p. 21), a nearly identical motion passed the 49th Assembly by a vote of 1059–681 (M49GA, p. 25).⁶⁹ At both Assemblies, Teaching Elder Carl D. Robbins presented the Committee of Commissioners’ recommendation that the PCA withdraw from the NAE. He made substantially the same presentation at each Assembly. What changed between 2019 and 2022 to put wind in the sails of the grassroots movement to cast away from the NAE? While both the advancing political progressivism and offensive theological broadness of the NAE surely strengthened the case that the PCA did not “fit” into the NAE, the greatest contributor to the change in result was the increased enrollment of commissioners who found Pastor Robbins’ arguments convincing. The decision to withdraw from the NAE quite literally paid off for the PCA as an expensive and

time-consuming partnership of unequally yoked organizations – one a visible expression of the church, and one a parachurch political advocacy group – came to an end. The PCA continues to be actively involved in NAPARC, and the denomination is currently exploring participation in the International Conference of Reformed Churches (ICRC).

In the summer of 2023, the 50th General Assembly amended the *Rules of Assembly Operation (RAO)* to include the following requirement for minutes presented by Permanent Committees and Agencies: “A recording of information sufficient to demonstrate the Committee’s or Board’s implementation of instructions received from General Assembly and of material policies and material policy changes adopted by the Committee or Board in that year” (RAO 4–21.d.4). This change added an important mechanism for the strengthening of the General Assembly’s review and control of the activities of the denomination’s Permanent Committees and Boards. Generally speaking, review and control of the Permanent Committees and Agencies is enacted through the annually appointed Committees of Commissioners, a hallmark feature of the historic polity of the PCA from the very beginning of the denomination. If the PCA yet aspires to an “intensely Presbyterian” form of church government, it is one that continues to bear a uniquely “grassroots” quality.

CONCLUSION

Going into the sixth decade of the PCA’s existence, the scale of the PCA’s mission at home and abroad has expanded dramatically. At the 50th General Assembly, the Stated Clerk reported a total of 390,319 members in 1,627 churches spread across 88 presbyteries. This represents more than a nine-fold increase in membership over the span of a half century. To God alone be the glory! Insofar as the numerical increase or faithfulness enjoyed by the PCA—or any church, for that matter—is true and lasting, “it is of God” (Acts 5:39); and if it is of God, it cannot be overthrown. God has delivered such

68. To review footage of the deliberations and votes, see “PCA 2021 Thu Afternoon Business #4,” 48th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, America’s Convention Center Complex (St. Louis, MO), filmed July 1, 2021, Video of business, 1:49:41–3:07:29, <https://vimeo.com/840644561>.

69. N.B. There were two votes taken at the 49th Assembly related to this action. The first vote (1030–699) was to make the motion to withdraw from the NAE—technically a substitute motion—the main motion. The second vote (1059–681) was to pass the motion to withdraw from the NAE. Though effectively redundant, the second vote is the official tally for the withdrawal of the PCA from the NAE.

blessings of fruitfulness through the efforts and sacrifices of many men, too few of whom received mention above. “And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets” (Heb. 11:32).

As of the end of 2023, the doctrinal Standards of the PCA remain the same as they were when initially adopted fifty years earlier. So too does the founding generation’s zeal for evangelism and missions, with MTW setting a goal of mobilizing 1% of the overall membership of the PCA into foreign missions, and with MNA casting a vision of growing the denomination to 3,000 churches in the next 10 years. At the same time, there is an urgent need to equip young men to backfill the vacancies that are already beginning to emerge across the Church with the retirement and promotion (into glory) of the aging Baby Boomer generation. The work of faithful theological seminaries and training programs is critical for addressing the Church’s need in this area, even as the power resides in God to keep seminaries faithful and to call men into service. May God hear His people as they pray according to Christ’s inaugural discipleship directive to “beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest” (Matt. 9:38).

With prayer comes wonder. It is appropriate to marvel with a sense of wonder at God’s gracious condescension to hear His people when they pray. In quite another sense, it is appropriate to wonder about what challenges will confront the rising generation of preachers, pastors, and churchmen who will serve the PCA in the years and decades ahead. One urgent issue that may soon come up in the courts of the PCA is how best to address situations and incidents of various kinds of abuse. While some in the Church believe that the solution lies in contracting with third party investigators and recognized experts in addressing and preventing abuse (*M49GA*, p. 951), the Presbyterian form of government provides a mechanism for outside investigation and accountability in the form of graded courts exercising review and control (*BCO* 11–4).

Another important matter that may occupy the attention of presbyters in years ahead is one that the Church has left unresolved until now: the unmet goal of adopting an authoritative standard or set of guidelines for the PCA’s public worship. This issue strikes at the very heart of the PCA’s shared identity; more than any other aspect of a church’s ministry, a church’s worship constitutes its corporate witness and public testimony. At the birth of the PCA, the founding fathers of the denomination aspired to be “intensely Presbyterian,” and this aspiration extended to their worship. However, they failed to

adopt a constitutionally binding Directory for Worship, becoming the first Presbyterian denomination of any historical significance not to have a comprehensive and authoritative standard for the conduct of its worship. For this reason alone (though others exist), the PCA could not rightly be considered a “Thoroughly Reformed” Presbyterian body at any point of its history. However, no church can be said to be such.

Even in the halcyon days of Calvin’s Geneva in the 1540s, the Westminster Assembly in the 1640s, the Great Awakening of the 1740s, the period of westward expansion and great polity debates of the mid 19th century, or decades of Mainline Protestant cultural leadership in the mid 20th century, there has never been what might be called a “Thoroughly Reformed” denomination. There have ever only been imperfect Churches that were more-or-less truly Reformed as they were being reformed according to the Word of God. However, when the PCA emerged as the Continuing Presbyterian Church in the American South, the men were “Aspirationally Reformed” in a way that the Continuing Church must not forsake today. The aspirations of the PCA’s founding fathers must not give way to a vain complacency among their heirs.

What has been done—or left undone—in the PCA over the last 50 years is not the measure of how Reformed the Church can or should be. The rising generation of elders either new to or born in the PCA must study the Word of God and examine the Church’s ministry over and against the standard found therein. Such study should inspire a deeper Reformed and Presbyterian conception of what it means to be faithful to the Scriptures, true to the Reformed Faith, and obedient to the Great Commission of the Lord Jesus Christ who alone reigns supreme as Head of the Church and only King in Zion. May God bless the PCA!■