

The Doctrine and Practice of Social Reform in the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America: 1930–1945

By Joel Hart

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Introduction

What could prevent the church from maintaining a hearing for the gospel? In 1947, conservative evangelical Carl Henry proposed perhaps a surprising answer to this question: a failure to speak on issues of social justice. He declared that the "church needs a progressive fundamentalism with a social message," and that a church that failed to address the world's social ills would lose its opportunity to proclaim the Christian hope.¹ Today, the church stands a generation removed from Henry, and the question remains: Can the church maintain its gospel witness? Was Henry right in his assessment, and what would it look like for a church to devote itself to the issues of social reform?

In considering these questions, a case study can be explored in evaluating the social work and doctrine of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA) from 1930 to 1945, the Depression-War Era (DWE).² In the DWE, the RPCNA gave extensive attention to social reform, primarily through committees of the denominational synod that spoke to doctrinal and practical implications of contemporary cultural

issues.³ The attempt to maintain a vigorous doctrine and practice of social reform while seeking to remain in the camp of conservative evangelicalism placed the denomination in a unique place among debates within the broader church on issues of social engagement. Ultimately, the RPCNA's doctrine of Christ's mediatorial kingship and understanding of Christ's purposes and methods for advancing His kingdom led the denomination to a comprehensive and active approach to contemporary social issues in the economic and international spheres.

The Depression-War Era RPCNA Doctrine of Social Reform

CHRIST'S MEDIATORIAL KINGSHIP OVER THE NATIONS

Foundational to the RPCNA approach to social reform in the early 20th century was the doctrine of the mediatorial kingship of Christ.⁴ In 1918, Richard

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1. Carl F. H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1947), 13–15.

2. Abbreviations and acronyms used in this article: CIR (Committee on International Relations); CNR (Committee on National Reform); CSJ (Committee on Social Justice); CST (Committee on the Signs of the Times); DWE (Depression-War Era {1930–1945}); NRA (National Reform Association); RPCNA (Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America); WC (Witness Committee).

3. Background information about the major committees discussed in the paper can be found in Appendix A.

4. The RPCNA Testimony (23–4) articulates the doctrine of Christ's mediatorial kingship: "Every nation ought to recognize the Divine institution of civil government, the sovereignty of God exercised by Jesus Christ, and its duty to rule the civil affairs of men in accordance

Wylie, a professor at the denominational seminary and devoted leader in the National Reform Association (NRA), wrote *Collapse of Christless Civilizations*, a summary of the kingship of Christ and its impact on nations.⁵ Wylie articulated the historic Reformed Presbyterian doctrine that by virtue of Christ's Messianic work as the God-man, He inherited a kingship over the earth that demands the allegiance of men and nations.⁶ Wylie further argued that Christ the King would "save the world of humanity, the Kosmos, the orderly arrangement of mankind in families and nations."⁷ Wylie's expansive approach served as a continuing articulation of the historic Reformed Presbyterian approach to Christ's kingship as a foundation for the church and society. Democratized America had done little to wane the zeal for Christ's kingship of the historic Scottish denomination.

Wylie's construct echoed broadly across the RPCNA in the DWE. The 1935 Committee on the Signs of the Times (CST)⁸ revealed a commendable hope in Christ's kingship, declaring:

with the will of God. ... The negligence of civil government in any of these particulars is sinful, makes the nation liable to the wrath of God, and threatens the continued existence of the government and nation." For a full treatment of this doctrine, consider William Symington, *Messiah the Prince: or, The Mediatorial Dominion of Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh: T. Nelson and Sons, 1881).

5. For biographical information on Wylie, consider Owen F. Thompson, *Sketches of the Ministers of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America from 1888 to 1930* ([N.p.]: The Synod, [1930?]), 369–371.

6. Richard Cameron Wylie, *Collapse of Christless Civilizations* (Pittsburgh: National Reform Association, 1968), 19–45.

7. Wylie, 34–35.

8. Consider Appendix A for more information on the committees analyzed in this paper.

9. Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America, *Minutes of the Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America* (Pittsburgh: The Synod, 1834–); 1935 *Minutes*, 118. Hereafter RPCNA, [year] *Minutes*.

10. RPCNA, 1932 *Minutes*, 13.

11. A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 428–434.

12. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1946), 2:601.

13. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1938), 408.

14. As the discussion below will show, the growing acknowledgment of Christ's kingship also included more mainline theologians and not simply members of the Reformed community highlighted here.

15. RPCNA, 1934 *Minutes*, 125.

16. RPCNA, 1941 *Minutes*, 21.

17. RPCNA, 1940 *Minutes*, 84.

18. RPCNA, 1942 *Minutes*, 59.

It may be that some are so concerned about the clouds and darkness that are round him that they are in danger of losing sight of the enthroned King, who holds the scepter over the world even while 'the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing.'⁹

Similarly, the 1932 Witness Committee (WC) concluded their report with this recommendation:

That the hardness of people's hearts and their unwillingness to turn to God do not hinder us from every effort to bring them to the recognition of Jesus Christ as the only Saviour, the Head of the Church and the Ruler of Nations.¹⁰

As is seen in these confident articulations, as the middle of the twentieth century approached, Christ's kingship continued to serve as an operative principle for the RPCNA perspective on the world.

Belief in Christ's expansive kingship over men and nations was not absolutely distinctive to the RPCNA in the 1930s and 1940s. In 1860, A.A. Hodge wrote that "Christ's mediatorial authority embraces the universe," and that such authority obligated nations to acknowledge Christ as king.¹¹ In 1871, Charles Hodge spoke of Christ's "mediatorial government of the universe."¹² In 1938, Louis Berkhof articulated the mediatorial kingship, although he placed less emphasis than Wylie did on the reign being unto the submission of the nations to Christ.¹³ While these positions may not have fully aligned to the RPCNA doctrine of Christ's kingship, the denomination recognized this growing acknowledgment.¹⁴ The 1934 WC rejoiced that "God in His providence [was] awakening His people" to the Covenanter truths.¹⁵ In 1941, the CST wrote,

In these days of the downfall of nations ... there is a growing belief that both the conquerors and the conquered are under the hand of God and subject to His rule. There is among Christians a movement toward Christ as King and Lord of all.¹⁶

Nevertheless, the RPCNA saw themselves as standard-bearers for Christ's mediatorial kingship. They believed that the denomination had "advanced training and position on the kingship of Christ,"¹⁷ and that RPCNA ministers were "the best qualified men we know of" to prepare messages on the "Headship of the Lord Jesus Christ over the Nations of the World."¹⁸ In the end, however, the DWE RPCNA recognized that their distinction rested not so much on the formal articulation

of the doctrine of mediatorial kingship, but on its application to the world.¹⁹

CHRIST'S KINGDOM PURPOSES: WORLDWIDE SOCIAL REFORM

The DWE RPCNA's distinctive application of Christ's mediatorial kingship can be summarized in a simple phrase: comprehensive gospel reform of men and nations before the return of Christ. The 1937 Committee on National Reform (CNR) presented this reform ideal with their "Confession of Faith" on national reform:

We believe in the Kingdom conception of the mission of Christ to this world. We believe He came to save individuals. We believe He came to save society, to save the world in the totality of its inter-related and complex life. We believe in a Gospel that has a message both for the individual life and for the organized life of humanity, and that it is as essential to give the message to the one as to the other.²⁰

This gospel unto the salvation of society had an expansive perspective on human need that aligned to the mainline evangelicalism of the mid-twentieth century. Thus, the 1934 CST could leverage the work of the Bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church who declared: "Nothing which concerns human welfare can be foreign to this Gospel. ... The worth of human life lies at the root of the social teaching of Jesus."²¹ Ultimately, the RPCNA promoted a form of a social gospel, exemplified in the sermon of R. J. G. McKnight at the 1934 Synod in which he decried those "who fervently proclaim individual conversion, but have no social gospel."²²

For the RPCNA, the social gospel drove the church to specific analyses of the societal suffering. The 1933 CST proclaimed that the world would receive "a social Gospel that will do away with the distressing oppression of the poor and helpless, the inequalities between classes and the greedy selfishness that marks the social life of today."²³ With a similar approach, the 1937 Committee on Social Justice (CSJ) could stand with the 1936 Methodist General Conference in summarizing sinful societal conditions:

Privation in the midst of potential plenty; Gross inequality in income and property... unemployment ... preventable sickness ... reduction in the support of public and private education ... Extensive denial of equal opportunity as a result of economic circumstance or

racial condition; The wasteful and unintelligent use of natural resources.²⁴

As seen here, for the RPCNA, massive social reform in the specifics of human suffering was a necessary and significant consequence of Christ's comprehensive reign.

This social gospel of physical welfare contained significant echoes of the social gospel movement promoted by Walter Rauschenbusch (1861–1918). Rauschenbusch, who regarded the substitutionary atonement as a post-Biblical concept,²⁵ described the social gospel as follows:

The social gospel is the old message of salvation ... enlarged and intensified. The individualistic gospel has ... not evoked faith in the will and power of God to redeem the permanent institutions of human society from their inherited guilt of oppression and extortion. The social gospel seeks to bring men under repentance for ... collective sins ... It calls on us for the faith of the old prophets who believed in the salvation of nations.²⁶

Critical to Rauschenbusch's formulation was the tie of the social gospel to the salvation of nations, a concept the DWE RPCNA could easily embrace. He desired for theology to take "the problems of social redemption and [consider] how its doctrines connect with the Kingdom of God in actual realization."²⁷ In Rauschenbusch's worldview, kingdom realization looked to imitate Christ in moving toward "a higher social order in which new ethical standards would become practicable."²⁸ From this perspective, he offered a litany of social issues that God would be addressing, including "child labour ... the exploitation of the lowly by the strong ... adequate food, education, recreation, and a really human opportunity for all."²⁹ One cannot miss the similarity between Rauschenbusch's list here and the list of societal ills offered by the RPCNA in conjunction with the Methodist Church.³⁰ Rauschenbusch presented a comprehensive

19. RPCNA, 1940 Minutes, 25.

20. RPCNA, 1937 Minutes, 119.

21. RPCNA, 1934 Minutes, 125.

22. R. J. G. McKnight, "Moderator's Sermon to the Synod, Young People's and Women's Organizations at Winona Lake, Indiana," *The Covenanter Witness*, August 1934, 84. RPCNA, 1934 Minutes, 20.

23. RPCNA, 1933 Minutes, 50.

24. RPCNA, 1937 Minutes, 121.

25. Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1917), 243.

26. Rauschenbusch, 5.

27. Rauschenbusch, 17.

28. Rauschenbusch, 24.

29. Rauschenbusch, 7–8.

30. See the statements above from the 1934 CST and the 1937 CSJ.

perspective on Christ's kingdom, and for him, such a kingdom demanded engagement in social reform to be comprehensive as well. For the RPCNA, Rauschenbusch's approach could easily resonate with the denominational thinking on Christ's comprehensive kingship.

While the DWE RPCNA embraced this broad social gospel, they did not eschew the classic protestant gospel of the salvation by grace through the atoning work of Christ. In 1937, the Synod published a denominational confession of sin, in which they acknowledged:

[O]ur sins of covenant-breaking are especially grievous, being treachery against, and in the face of, our blessed Saviour who, as the eternal Son of God, in His incarnation gathered His glory within the limits of a manger; in His ministry bore the trials and weaknesses of our manhood; on the cross outwardly expressed His live in dying for our sin.³¹

Similarly, the 1932 CST stated the need for the substitutionary atonement and clarified the inability of the unregenerate to perform good works.³² In the end, the DWE RPCNA believed that Christ's kingship could encompass and promote both the social gospel and the evangelical gospel of new life in Christ. Thus, the 1937 CST concluded:

The unwholesome tendency in Christian thinking today is to divide into groups of "either or." Either individual salvation or social reformation; either an earthly kingdom or a spiritual kingdom. ... Is our Gospel a Gospel of extremes? ... Is not either view less than half a Gospel? How can one succeed or be secure without the other?³³

It must be noted, however, that in this attempt to balance individual salvation and social reformation, the DWE RPCNA often leaned towards emphasizing social reformation. Generally, the details and implications of a

social gospel gained the primary place for the denomination, and the gospel of salvation through the cross served as a silent backdrop. The assessment of J.G. Vos, a missionary in the DWE RPCNA, speaks well to this unfortunate reality:

The leadership [of the RPCNA] in some cases regarded the historic faith of the church as an outmoded and unimportant thing. Actual faith seemed to be in social reform. ... It seemed a great pity to take our cue from people who not believe really in redemption through the blood of Christ but in the reformation of society through various projects.³⁴

The final aspect to consider in evaluating the RPCNA doctrine of Christ's kingdom purposes is the denomination's post-millennial confidence in the realization of Christ's expansive reign. The 1936 CST summarized their post-millennial expectation as follows:

The world is yet to become the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is not to be achieved by the personal return of Jesus Christ to reign. ... This would be to leave unfulfilled many of the glorious promises of the Scriptures for the world.³⁵

In 1945, on the cusp of the end of World War II, the CST wrote,

[O]ne glad day men will see. They shall understand. They see the true pattern as God sees it and with an imperturbable confidence and an abiding faith they shall proclaim Jesus as the sovereign Ensign of the Peoples and the standard of the nations.³⁶

Ultimately, as the prayer request of the 1940 WC reveals, the RPCNA rested its hope on the work of the unseen Holy Spirit:

That though we see not yet the results of our work we urge our people to have faith in the truth and in the working of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of those who receive the truth, that it will at last prevail and bring great results.³⁷

What made this post-millennialism remarkable in the DWE is the cultural despair that the tragic events of the era engendered. Francis Schaeffer later asserted that, in this era the United States culturally crossed the "line of despair," moving from "romantic notions of absolutes" to perceiving the world as without purpose.³⁸ For many

31. RPCNA, 1938 Minutes, 103.

32. RPCNA, 1932 Minutes, 51.

33. RPCNA, 1937 Minutes, 121.

34. J. G. Vos, "Discontinuance of Publication of *Blue Banner Faith and Life*" (Clay Center, KS: 1979), 1. This point is partially indebted to James Faris for his analysis on the RPCNA from 1942–1951. Cf. James Faris, "We Stand at the Parting of the Ways: The Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America: 1942–1951" (paper submitted to the RPCNA Great-Lakes Gulf Presbytery, 2002), 13.

35. RPCNA, 1936 Minutes, 76.

36. RPCNA, 1945 Minutes, 93.

37. RPCNA, 1940 Minutes, 23.

38. Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M. Bowman Jr, *Faith Has Its Reasons*, 2nd Ed. (Colorado Springs: Biblica Publishing, 2005), 447.

theologians, as D. G. Hart asserts, the Great Depression caused them to reconsider “confidence in human nature and society.”³⁹ Ultimately, the events of the DWE damaged hope in the post-millennial hypothesis of a glorious, peaceful era under the reign of Christ before His final return. At the end of the era, dispensational systematic theologian Lewis Chafer declared, “That the theory of [post-millennialism] is dead by now cannot be denied.”⁴⁰ While certainly Chafer overstated his case here⁴¹, in the face of the despair of economic depression and international war, the kingship-based confidence of the RPCNA notably countered a changing milieu of eschatological views.

CHRIST’S KINGDOM METHODS: CHURCH ENGAGEMENT IN CULTURAL REFORM

The DWE RPCNA believed that Christ would realize His expansive kingdom through active engagement of the church in this cultural reform. Just as the church believed in a social gospel and gospel of individual salvation, so they believed the church should capably devote itself to each of these enterprises.⁴² In the realm of social reform, the RPCNA believed it to be incumbent upon the church to labor for the gospel victories of a new social order. The 1942 CST expressed this sentiment, declaring:

We believe that our cause is the cause of God. God has called us to serve and sacrifice in the interests of an international order in which reason, justice and good will shall be the governing principle—an international order built upon freedom to develop to the highest possible level the physical, moral and spiritual resources of the human spirit.⁴³

Similarly, ten years earlier, the 1932 Committee on International Relations (CIR) could write:

We here assume that the ideals, teachings, and spirit of Christ Jesus are to become regnant in the political and economic spheres of human life and that it is our business to turn the light of the Gospel upon the concrete issues which so gravely affect the ... world.⁴⁴

One must understand that for the RPCNA, the pursuit of social reform intrinsically tied to covenantal faithfulness. In 1871, the denomination had signed a covenant in which they vowed:

[W]e are pledged to promote the interests of public

order and justice, to support cheerfully whatever is for the good of the commonwealth in which we dwell, and to pursue this object in all things not forbidden by the law of God. ... We will pray and labor for the peace and welfare of our country.⁴⁵

Here the church committed to an active stance on issues relating to public well-being. A generation later, the DWE RPCNA still consciously identified as a Covenantal church, and covenant obligations remained in its thinking. In NRA president R.H. Martin’s 1931 Report, he quoted the 1888 CNR, saying:

National Reform is paramount among all reforms. ... The very thought of its complete and successful issue thrills the soul of the true Covenanter. ... Our Church must ever keep the cause of National Reform in the forefront and give it the largest place in her thought and prayer and enterprise. Our interest in it indicates a standing or falling of the Reformed Presbyterian Church. It is the test of a man’s character as a Covenanter. Indifference to it is a sin against the church and a violation of Covenant obligations.⁴⁶

Martin’s language could hardly be stronger as he cast a vision for the RPCNA that the denomination’s existence and faithfulness depended on the pursuit of social reform.

The RPCNA believed that advocating for reform-based government policies provided the primary means to pursue the new social order. The belief that nations were bound to the same Christian principles as individuals guided such policy efforts. Thus, the 1941 NRA report reads:

39. D. G. Hart, *Defending the Faith* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1963), 134.

40. Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1993), 280–281.

41. See the discussion below of the Christian World Order for some examples of applied post-millennialism as a continuing ideal in the mid-twentieth century.

42. The denomination’s commitment in the DWE to missions in regions such as Syria, Cyprus, China, and Hong Kong revealed a continued commitment to the saving grace of Christ in individual lives. Cf. 1940 *Minutes of the Synod of the RPCNA*, 28–33, and 42–46 for an exemplary summary of these efforts.

43. RPCNA, 1942 *Minutes*, 81.

44. RPCNA, 1932 *Minutes*, 17.

45. *The Constitution of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America* (Pittsburgh: Crown & Covenant Publications, 2004), I-8, 9.

46. RPCNA, 1931 *Minutes*, 49. As is noted in Appendix A, it is key to note here that the NRA was an inter-denominational institution. Nevertheless, as is seen even in Martin’s quote here, the link between the denomination and the NRA was indelible.

[T]he same moral laws of God that govern individuals ... are binding upon nations in their relations and obligations to each other. ... "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." "He that saveth his life shall lose it, but he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it!" These Scriptures are just as applicable to nations as to individuals.⁴⁷

The 1941 CSJ presented a similar sentiment in promoting international policy based on the concept that nations were to collectively lose their lives for the sake of the gospel.⁴⁸ For the DWE RPCNA, reform did not simply entail a government run by Christian principles. Instead, the denomination believed that God obligated government to function sacrificially in the same manner as individuals were to sacrifice in order to bring about victories for Christ's kingdom. To achieve these kingdom victories, the DWE RPCNA sought "the conversion of Uncle Sam," and in practical terms, implementation of "specific reforms in the political sphere" that would bring the nation "into willing and loyal allegiance to Jesus Christ, its Saviour-King."⁴⁹ With these objectives in mind, the DWE RPCNA could justify focusing on public policy and legislation as the means of bringing the reform of the social gospel. The RPCNA constituency did not seek a limited government, but a government that could co-labor with the church in bringing gospel reform.

This formulated doctrine of the church's activity in social reform placed the DWE RPCNA in the heart of debates within the evangelical world. In contrast to Rauschenbusch's social gospel and liberalism, Westminster Theological Seminary founder J. Gresham Machen (1881–1937) served as the face of a movement within fundamentalism that fought for the gospel of salvation for an individual sinner, held fervently to highly conservative politics, and observed skeptically the social gospel movement.⁵⁰ This confluence of values led to a localized perspective for Machen on social reform, seen in the contrast between his disregard for government social reforms and the example of his extensive effort in

helping a neighborhood man struggling with alcohol.⁵¹ This anecdote reveals the contrast with the RPCNA: while Machen sought to reform society one drunken man at a time, the RPCNA wanted the government prohibition of the alcohol that placed the drunk on the street.⁵²

In these debates over God's kingdom methods, the RPCNA perhaps most aligned to the worldview of Clarence Macartney (1879–1957), a prominent fundamentalist ally who had grown up in the RPCNA and embraced aspects of the denominational perspective on social reform.⁵³ Macartney's support of aspects of social reform enabled him to somewhat moderate the clash between Machen and the liberal theologians.⁵⁴ It is little surprise that in 1945, the CST leveraged a McCartney sermon as the anchor point for their assessment of the social horrors of the day.⁵⁵ The RPCNA gladly stood in the camp of the fundamentalist-social reform worldview of this denominational son. However, when considering from where McCartney first learned this perspective, perhaps it is more accurate to say that McCartney stood in the camp of the RPCNA.

In the end, the RPCNA reform methodology suffered from an unrefined approach to civil government and the labor of the church. For a denomination that believed it had "advanced training" on issues relating to national government, the RPCNA appeared to merge the role of church and state in the pursuit of social reformation. Systematic theologian John Murray (1898–1975) perhaps provided a clearer direction on church, state, and Christ's mediatorial kingship, as he argued that church and state "are both subordinate to ... Christ in his mediatorial dominion. Both church and state are under obligation to recognize ... the corresponding coordination of their respective spheres of operation."⁵⁶ It is this perspective on the separation of governmental and church obligations that seemed to be unclear to the RPCNA as the denomination functionally became a lobbying hub to the government. Local gospel ministry retreated as the RPCNA labored to move the government to lay down the nation's life for the latest social cause of interest to the church. The denomination certainly needed a more cohesive approach.

The Depression-War Era RPCNA Practice of Social Reform

CHRIST'S KINGDOM REFORM APPLIED: THE DWE RPCNA APPROACH

The DWE RPCNA confidently leveraged their social doctrine to promote an agenda of social reform. Each

47. RPCNA, 1941 Minutes, 67.

48. RPCNA, 1941 Minutes, 116–120.

49. RPCNA, 1930 Minutes, 142.

50. Hart, *Defending the Faith*, 146.

51. Hart, *Defending the Faith*, 142.

52. Cf. RPCNA, 1930 Minutes, 15.

53. Bradley J. Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 114–117.

54. Longfield, 225–226.

55. RPCNA, 1945 Minutes, 90–93.

56. John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 1:254.

of the constituent parts of this action plan had a Christian amendment to the US Constitution as the ultimate goal. The denomination believed that a constitution that acknowledged Christ as king would reveal “national regeneration,”⁵⁷ and pastors were called to campaign for issues related to Christ’s kingship in their respective communities.⁵⁸ Advocacy efforts for the amendment were generally sporadic in the DWE, but they did include hiring William Aikin to preach on the topic⁵⁹ and the preparation of formal language to add to the Constitution.⁶⁰ Efforts intensified as the war ended with the formation of a newspaper devoted to the amendment and preparation of lobbyists hired to promote the amendment’s cause.⁶¹ However, the RPCNA believed the amendment could be better pursued “in connection with . . . specific moral reforms which are pressing for solution.”⁶² Thus, as a means to an end of a Christianized America, the DWE RPCNA devoted itself to various social reform movements that included the confrontation of issues relating to economics and international relations. It is to these two issues that the remainder of this paper will be devoted.⁶³

CHRIST’S KINGDOM REFORM APPLIED: ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION

The DWE RPCNA’s perspective on economics flowed from the denominational experience in the Great Depression. The Depression greatly impacted the functioning of the RPCNA, a reality revealed largely in the minutes of the 1934 Synod, which could rightly be branded as the “Synod of Economic Despair.” At this Synod, financial receipts were reported as only 30% of what had been recorded ten years earlier at the 1924 Synod.⁶⁴ The Board of Foreign Missions reported the need for substantial reductions in missionary salaries.⁶⁵ The Board of Control, a board that distributed financial aid within the RPCNA, wrote of extensive requests for financial help among church members and spoke of those who had lost all savings and income due to the economic downturn.⁶⁶ It is little surprise that the Synod of Economic Despair ended with prayer for those dealing with “unemployment and financial distress.”⁶⁷

This Synod of Economic Despair took time to evaluate the financial crisis and saw no other reason for it than the judgment of God on an unrepentant nation. The WC report began with this assessment:

The Bible gives us no account of any nation suffering except for its sins. Our nation and all the nations of the world are now suffering: is it not because of their

sinfulness? Neither is there any record in the Bible of any nation turning to God in repentance but that he received it graciously and sent relief. He is ready to forgive. This is God’s appointed way out of the depression with which we are afflicted.⁶⁸

The 1934 CST spoke more specifically as to how God had judged the economic system:

Our land is under judgment. The selfishness and inefficiency of [those] in finance, industry, and politics have resulted in an almost complete breakdown of machinery for the exchange of goods and services. . . . The farmer suffers for the lack of that which the artisan could produce and the artisan suffers for lack of the food that rots in the field.⁶⁹

This view of the judgment of God in the depression cohered with the denominational view that a nation’s refusal to submit to Christ as king primed the nation for economic judgment. Nevertheless, the post-millennial optimism of the RPCNA meant that not only would judgment be needed, but also that economic reform could bring gospel restoration to the country. To bring such restoration about, the Synod studied with the hope that its ministers would become equipped to advocate for a Biblical view of economics among the general population.⁷⁰

In promoting economic training for their pastors, the DWE RPCNA most sought to equip their ministers to target perceived evils of a capitalistic society for reform. The 1936 CSJ believed the depression revealed “the unsoundness of our economic system” and that “if capitalism is not supplanted by communism, it must be radically reformed.”⁷¹ The 1943 CST took on capitalism more fully, declaring:

57. RPCNA, 1937 Minutes, 123.

58. RPCNA, 1944 Minutes, 54.

59. RPCNA, 1933 Minutes, 16.

60. RPCNA, 1937 Minutes, 152.

61. RPCNA, 1945 Minutes, 38.

62. RPCNA, 1931 Minutes, 46.

63. It must be noted here that the RPCNA actively engaged in other movements of social reform not considered in this paper, including, perhaps most prominently, the temperance movement.

64. RPCNA, 1934 Minutes, 57; 1924 Minutes, 121.

65. RPCNA, 1934 Minutes, 130.

66. RPCNA, 1934 Minutes, 80.

67. RPCNA, 1934 Minutes, 154.

68. RPCNA, 1934 Minutes, 8.

69. RPCNA, 1934 Minutes, 124.

70. RPCNA, 1940 Minutes, 84.

71. RPCNA, 1936 Minutes, 75.

[W]e must ... look to a future in which free enterprise will be ... much more under government control. ... We may be actually more free under increased government control than we could hope to be without it. For the world is passing from the free "open road" phase of economic living, and is approaching the "congested traffic" phase of economic living where increased control is imperative if we are to make progress.⁷²

For the DWE RPCNA, the land was under judgment, the current form of capitalism was the culprit, and reconstruction of economic life was in order.

The 1938 CSJ presented a proposal for a new economic order with a discussion of the Year of Jubilee. In this proposal, the CSJ promoted "the right of opportunity to work," described as "a socially controlled individualistic system of equal opportunity to work."⁷³ They proposed that the government could ensure this right-to-work by providing land or corporate shares to anyone who completed an education.⁷⁴ Further, the CSJ argued that "wealth must not concentrate to a few."⁷⁵ They said,

There is an ever-present tendency toward concentration of wealth in fewer hands, a tendency which should be neutralized by some reverse action.... Clearly the Bible favors some means of counteracting the tendency to concentration of wealth.⁷⁶

The paper advocated a graduated income tax as the means to achieving wealth redistribution. Ultimately, the committee saw that the failure of the government to properly ensure the right to work and the proper distribution of wealth had created a situation in which a select few grew richer while the majority of people suffered in unjust unemployment and poverty.⁷⁷

In the end, the DWE RPCNA's economic analysis came as a byproduct of the denomination's interpretation of eschatology and Christ's kingship in the face

of economic hardship. The eschatology being manifest in the RPCNA suggested that the gospel had procured comprehensive human flourishing, and thus, by implication, economic systems that produced poverty needed radical reform. The Great Depression enabled the RPCNA to focus its attention on capitalism as the cause for an unrealized eschatological economic flourishing in the United States. Further, the RPCNA belief in Christ's kingship over nations made the government the necessary target, since the civil magistrate had the authority to be proactive in solving the economic ills caused by capitalism. Even though the denomination suffered greatly in this era, it appears the denomination overstepped its bounds in its economic analysis. Before even addressing whether their economics were Biblical, one must wonder whether training ministers for lectures on economic policy realized the Biblical mission for the church. A church that seeks to gain expertise on nuanced economic policy will necessarily emerge insufficiently trained and unable to present sufficient proposals for reform.

CHRIST'S KINGDOM REFORM APPLIED: INTERNATIONAL HARMONY

While the Great Depression provided a forum for the RPCNA to address economic issues, the crisis of the world wars presented significant motivation for the RPCNA to address the relationship of the kingship of Christ to the international sphere. The historically Scottish denomination had long taken a stand for international peace as an outworking of Christ's mediatorial kingship,⁷⁸ and the horrific events of World War I only further solidified the RPCNA commitment to peace efforts. The denomination endorsed international peace movements, and in 1931 they approved a statement on international peace which the Synod sent to the President of the United States.⁷⁹ A denominational disapproval of a perceived pro-war stance in the United States' government undergirded these statements. The 1932 WC bemoaned the proportion of national revenue that the nation still spent on the military.⁸⁰ The 1939 Synod, held only a few months before the outbreak of World War II, declared increased spending on arms "a deplorable economic waste."⁸¹ In 1930, the CIR commended individuals refusing US citizenship because the country embraced "a militarism that is contrary to the law of the Lord Jesus Christ."⁸² The 1932 WC went even further, declaring that Jesus Christ would refuse citizenship because of the nation's overly militaristic naturalization vow.⁸³

72. RPCNA, 1943 *Minutes*, 105–106.

73. RPCNA, 1938 *Minutes*, 66.

74. RPCNA, 1938 *Minutes*, 67.

75. RPCNA, 1938 *Minutes*, 67.

76. RPCNA, 1938 *Minutes*, 67.

77. RPCNA, 1938 *Minutes*, 67–68.

78. Frank Smith, "American Presbyterianism and the Cold War," *The Confessional Presbyterian* 6 (2010): 90–92.

79. RPCNA, 1931 *Minutes*, 31–32.

80. RPCNA, 1932 *Minutes*, 12.

81. RPCNA, 1939 *Minutes*, 113.

82. RPCNA, 1930 *Minutes*, 29.

83. RPCNA, 1932 *Minutes*, 12.

The onslaught of the Second World War, however, shocked the denomination, and its perspective began to change. The 1941 CSJ called RP pastors to build public sentiment for the United States placing “the full weight of her influence and power into the scales for the suppression of anarchy and brutality in the international realm.”⁸⁴ The stated reason of the CSJ for entering the war was not the preservation of American freedoms, but instead, because of the obligation of nations to “lose their lives for the sake of the gospel.”⁸⁵ The CSJ pleaded:

Instinctively, we pose the question: What is good for America? Must we not further ask: What is America good for? If you were now dwelling in Poland or Czechoslovakia, you would be praying that America might be led of God to a sense of world responsibility.⁸⁶

After the war reached the United States, the support for the Allied cause increased with the belief that victory in the war would prove essential to preserving basic human freedoms.⁸⁷

As the RPCNA supported the Allied cause, they called the church to emphasize the promotion of the Biblical standards for laws, peace, and governments to be promoted in the world. The denomination believed that the individual spirituality of Lutheranism enabled the rise of Nazi Germany, and sturdy Covenanter Presbyterian international ethics were seen as a necessary contrasting voice in the world.⁸⁸ The 1941 CSJ declared,

This is a day above all others, for the church, for her ministers, to hold up God’s standards of righteousness for the nations in their dealings with each other ... to call them to repentance for their sins, to submission to their Creator and Savior-King, and to an acceptance of God’s righteousness, in their international relations. What doth the Lord require of thee, America, but to do justly, love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God, in all your dealings with other nations?⁸⁹

Behind the denomination’s ethical emphasis rested a belief that the just cause would certainly win the war⁹⁰ and that the war could lead to a realized eschatology of a more purified world emerging from the ashes of the conflict. Accordingly, the 1940 CSJ called the church to “pray that the nations may emerge purified and fit to undertake the task of building a new social order based on righteousness and truth.”⁹¹ This purification language recalled a long-standing American postmillennial cataclysmic concept. In the nineteenth century,

post-millennial Calvinist Leonard Woods (1774–1854) had declared that in war, God “[arises] to shake terribly the earth ... [before] the spiritual coming of Christ, and the millennial glory of the church.”⁹² In World War I, the cataclysm and restoration concept continued with preachers such as Billy Sunday touting the war as an apocalyptic struggle that would lead to renewed world.⁹³ For the RPCNA, when the Great Depression and the Second World War revealed further crisis that would precede any millennial glory, the millennial expectation remained unhindered. The war provided a perfect opportunity for the cleansing and remake of society under the Kingship of Christ.

The denomination focused their discussion of a renewed social order on the establishment of a worldwide Christian government. Even before the attack on Pearl Harbor, the CSJ declared that God had “ordained [the RPCNA] to be a prophet to the United States of America” as to how a world government should be arranged.⁹⁴ The denomination believed that lasting peace could only be procured by establishing “a New World Order that is based upon the Prince of Peace, the Governor among the nations, and in accordance with the principles of His Kingdom.”⁹⁵ NRA president R. H. Martin argued that Christians had the primary responsibility for promoting a post-war peace and that advocating for a new world government was the first responsibility of the church in regard to this peace.⁹⁶ While the RPCNA promoted the establishment of peace as the primary reason offered for this world order, they saw the order as necessary to manage the entire “no-man’s land of international relationships ... in matters relating to natural resources, open markets for goods, tariffs, [and] immigration laws.”⁹⁷ Ultimately, the denomination called for the United States to “surrender in matters of common concern of national sovereignty,

84. RPCNA, 1941 Minutes, 116.

85. RPCNA, 1941 Minutes, 116.

86. RPCNA, 1941 Minutes, 117.

87. RPCNA, 1942 Minutes, 84.

88. RPCNA, 1942 Minutes, 82.

89. RPCNA, 1941 Minutes, 118.

90. RPCNA, 1942 Minutes, 115.

91. RPCNA, 1940 Minutes, 84.

92. James H. Moorehead, *World Without End: Mainstream American Protestant Visions of the Last Things, 1800–1925* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 11.

93. Moorehead, 150–153.

94. RPCNA, 1941 Minutes, 120.

95. RPCNA, 1942 Minutes, 115.

96. R. H. Martin, “Responsibility for the New World Order,” *Covenanter Witness*, January 6, 1943, 501.

97. RPCNA, 1941 Minutes, 118.

and placing of that sovereignty with the international government.”⁹⁸

The RPCNA advocacy for a Christian World Order placed the denomination inside a long-standing ecumenical movement for a peaceful world government. During World War, the socially-minded Federal Council of Churches had anticipated a “constructive peace as shall be the beginning of a world democracy.”⁹⁹ Modernist Presbyterian Harry Emerson Fosdick (1878–1969) forcefully declared, “We must have a federation of the world. No other solution is great enough to deal with our critical need.”¹⁰⁰ The international world order movement continued into World War II with the vision of men such as Christian social justice advocate Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971).¹⁰¹ In 1942, an ecumenical body of the “Commission on a Just and Durable Peace” met in Ohio and endorsed “Guiding Principles” that included a belief that “it is the purpose of God to create a world-wide community in Jesus Christ, transcending nation, race and class.”¹⁰² From this meeting, denominational movements formed to advocate for the formulation of this order upon the end of the war.¹⁰³ The Methodist church called this a “Crusade for a New World Order,”¹⁰⁴ language closely paralleled in the documents of the RPCNA. Conservative stalwart John Murray also advocated for a Christian World Order in an article that the Reformed Presbyterian magazine, the *Covenanter Witness*, published in 1943.¹⁰⁵ However, Murray’s article lacked the emphasis on progressive internationalism found in the RPCNA writings.

The RPCNA’s labored extensively to promote this international government. *Covenanter* members of the NRA sought public approval of the world order via magazines, sermons, conferences, and the publication of a

“Christian Charter for a New World Order.”¹⁰⁶ The denominational magazine, the *Covenanter Witness*, published a “Petition for a Christian World Order” for which signatures were to be collected and sent to congressmen and President Roosevelt.¹⁰⁷ As the war approached its conclusion, the denomination looked with anticipation to the gathering of the United Nations. The NRA called the gathering of nations in San Francisco to sign the United Nations Charter “the most important political conference ever held in the history of the world.”¹⁰⁸ On the day Franklin Roosevelt died, the RPCNA wrote a letter to the President outlining their expectations for the Christian order and requested that the conference begin with prayer.¹⁰⁹ The Department of State responded somewhat favorably to the letter, writing:

There is no doubt . . . that a just and lasting peace can be built upon Christian principles. . . . It may be expected that as the practice of Christian principles grows stronger among the people, these same principles will increasingly regulate the relations among governments.¹¹⁰

However, this acknowledgment fell far short of expectations for a Christian world order, and the conference proceeded with little reference to the denomination’s lofty hopes. The 1947 Synod minutes revealed well the RPCNA reaction to the formation of the United Nations. While the CSJ expressed approval of some measures of established international justice, the CST expressed the great denominational disappointment: “The charter of the United Nations makes no recognition of divine authority.”¹¹¹ The labors for a Christian world order had failed.

Conclusion

The DWE efforts of the RPCNA represent a comprehensive attempt to apply a stated Christological, eschatological, and ecclesiological viewpoint to the economic and international crises of the day. At its core, the RPCNA addressed four primary questions that are worthy of consideration for Christ’s church.

1. What is the purpose of God in advancing His Kingdom?

The DWE RPCNA had a commendable optimism for the kingdom and truly believed God’s kingdom would be revealed “on earth as it is in heaven.” Unfortunately, the emphasis moved to the social gospel and their passion for the historical evangelical gospel waned. In light of this, the church today must wrestle with the relation between the cross and cultural reform and how to work

98. RPCNA, *1941 Minutes*, 119.

99. James H. Moorehead, *World Without End*, 151.

100. Moorehead, 152.

101. Heather A. Warren, *Theologians of a New World Order: Reinhold Niebuhr and the Christian Realists, 1920–1948* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 93–97.

102. Warren, 101.

103. Warren, 101.

104. Warren, 103.

105. John Murray, “The Christian World Order, part 1,” *Covenanter Witness*, November 10, 1943, 341–342; John Murray, “The Christian World Order, part 2,” *Covenanter Witness*, November 17, 1943, 357–359.

106. RPCNA, *1943 Minutes*, 80–83.

107. “Petition for A Christian World Order,” *Covenanter Witness*, November 3, 1943, 324–326. See appendix B for a copy of this petition.

108. RPCNA, *1945 Minutes*, 78.

109. RPCNA, *1945 Minutes*, 74–75.

110. RPCNA, *1945 Minutes*, 79.

111. RPCNA, *1947 Minutes*, 129.

towards a realized eschatology while not drifting from a gospel centrality.

2. *Where should Christ's church focus its efforts?* The DWE RPCNA confidently trusted its ability to labor for a new social order and believed such efforts delineated “the standing or falling of the Reformed Presbyterian Church.”¹¹² Its worldwide concern was commendable. Yet it appears the denomination often pursued governmental policy instead of the proclamation of the gospel in conducting their fight. The church today must consider how to emphasize the Biblical means given to the church to properly confront the world with the kingdom of God.

3. *What is the role of government in the kingdom of God?* The DWE RPCNA believed that the kingship of Christ over the nations demanded active government involvement in promoting social reform. For the RPCNA, this approach proved unsophisticated and often led to extreme suggestions for government intervention. In light of the DWE RPCNA's efforts and the contentious climate of 21st-century politics, a continued study is necessary of the implications of Christ's mediatorial kingship for civil government. Proponents of Christ's reign must consider whether expanded government as a means to fulfilling Christ's kingdom purposes properly delineates the roles of government, churches, and individuals. Conversely, where limited government is promoted, this principle must be advanced with consideration of whether and how Christ's mediatorial purposes for government correlate to a comprehensive limitation of its power.

4. *What does it mean to live under the mediatorial kingship of Christ?* The same Christ who reigned over the DWE RPCNA remains king of individuals, churches, and nations today. The DWE RPCNA sought to actively work out the implications of that kingship and in many cases, made questionable decisions. Yet disagreeing with those decisions does not excuse the church from considering what it means to live under the kingship of Christ. The church must confidently confront the challenges of the present day by learning from past decisions and seeking greater faithfulness to the church's King. The reign of Jesus Christ demands that the King and the kingdom be sought with boldness.

APPENDIX A: SUMMARY OF THE NRA AND RPCNA COMMITTEES ON SOCIAL MATTERS

National Reform Association—The National Reform Association (NRA) was founded in 1863 among a

collection of Protestant denominations that sought a Christian Amendment to the Constitution. While the organization existed separately from the RPCNA, Covenanters were central to its founding.¹¹³ During the DWE, many members of the RPCNA were members of the board of the NRA and gave a lengthy report to the Synod. It is clear that the work of the NRA was considered hand-in-hand with the labors of the RPCNA. The 1930 Synod referred to the NRA as the “child of the Covenanter people.”¹¹⁴ Covenanter Renwick H. Martin served and was employed as President of the NRA from 1928 to 1955.¹¹⁵ In this era, the RPCNA also had a Committee on National Reform that functioned alongside the NRA as a voice on national reform issues.

Signs of the Times Committee—The *Signs of the Times Committee* continued through 2016 as a committee of the RPCNA to evaluate contemporary events in light of Scripture.¹¹⁶ While often the committee focused on societal sins and trials (i.e. alcohol, wars, Sabbath-breaking), a positive element remained for the committee. The 1936 Committee sought signs in that culture that “announce the program of God for the well-being of the world . . . [that] point the way to safety.”¹¹⁷ This perspective often led the Committee to speak to needed changes and renewals in the social order of the day.

Witness Committee—The Witness Committee was formed as the Testimony Bearing Committee in 1888 for the purpose of stirring up the church in regard to distinctive RPCNA principles.¹¹⁸ With an emphasis on Christian Government came extensive discussion by the committee of the social application of the Mediatorial Kingship of Christ.

Committee on International Relations—The first report of the Committee on International Relations appeared in 1927. In that report, the committee challenged the church to enunciate “the fundamental principles of the kingdom of God which relate to nations” and to “seek to mold public sentiment in reference to concrete international problems.”¹¹⁹ The committee was dissolved in 1933 as its mission became part of the *Committee on Social Justice*.

Committee on Social Justice—The Committee on

112. RPCNA, 1941 Minutes, 67.

113. John Alexander, *History of the National Reform Movement* (Pittsburgh: Shaw Brothers, 1893), 5.

114. RPCNA, 1930 Minutes, 140.

115. Alvin W. Smith, *Covenanter Ministers 1930–1963* (Pittsburgh: Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America, [1964?]), 112–115.

116. RPCNA, 2016 Minutes, 199.

117. RPCNA, 1936 Minutes, 73.

118. RPCNA, 1938 Minutes, 22.

119. RPCNA, 1927 Minutes, 87.

Social Justice was established in 1933 and charged to study the relationship of Christianity to economic life, international relations, government, and race.¹²⁰ The committee labored until 1952 when it was disbanded due to the challenge of addressing controversial topics and the lack of impact of the committee’s reports.¹²¹

APPENDIX B: 1943 PETITION FOR A CHRISTIAN WORLD ORDER¹²²

PETITION FOR A CHRISTIAN WORLD ORDER

TO THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES:

The undersigned citizens of the United States, deeply concerned that the United Nations shall win the peace as well as the war, present for your consideration the following, which we believe essential to a just and durable peace:

I. The Establishing of a Christian World Order.

Only a Christian order can bring peace. It calls for:

A CHRISTIAN CHARTER

embodying the fundamental principles of Christian governments, such as these:

Nations are subjects of the moral government of God, and owe allegiance to Him. His laws for their government are found in the Bible. Their highest expression is in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, the Saviour and Ruler of nations. Of Him, the Divine lawbook for Nations declares:

“The government shall be upon his shoulders; his name shall be called ... Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end.”

If we would have peace let us build the New World Order upon Him as its foundation according to the basic laws of His Kingdom – righteousness and human brotherhood.

This Christian Charter should also contain

A BILL OF RIGHTS FOR MANKIND

implementing these basic principles, such as:

- a. Religious, intellectual and economic freedom for all peoples.
- b. Equality of opportunity for all men regardless of birth, race, or nationality.
- c. The right of the people under colonial governments to be governed justly and to prepare them for self-government.
- d. The right of security against war.

II. The Establishing of an International World Government.

Within nations we have established government and enacted laws for peaceable settlement of disputes. In the No-Man’s Land of international relationship, we, as yet, have failed to establish government. So long as this international anarchy continues, in in this shrunken world we will have constantly recurring global wars.

To save civilization we must establish a government over nations, clothe it with authority at least sufficient to enact laws to suppress international brigandage and lawlessness, and with power sufficient to enforce obedience to them.

Our forefathers in 1787 adopted this principle scale warrants the conviction that it is valid for the of federal government. Its success on a continental world.

III. America’s Participation in Establishing a Christian World Order and Government.

For our participation there are compelling reasons:

- a. No world with hope of peace can be set up without our help.
- b. Our national interest demands our participation. The alternative to international cooperation in establishing the reign of law, justice and peace in the world, is international anarchy, the maintenance of huge national armaments, and the recurrence of global wars involving our nation.
- c. As a Christian people we have obligations to humanity which can be fulfilled only by our collaboration. The Christian law of life, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself,” requires America to seek the safety and welfare of other nations to the same extent she seeks her own. Besides, America is a chosen nation, chosen of the Lord and blest, not for her own sake, but for the sake of the whole world. We now face our greatest opportunity to fulfill this world mission.

In this appeal for a Christian World Order we are realists, not impractical idealists. Anti-Christian principles in the international realm have proven unrealistic and impracticable. They have drenched the earth with the blood of unnumbered millions of its choicest manhood. The Christian way of life for nations is the realistic way. It alone will work. We call upon you, our representatives, to set it to work in the New World Order.

Adopted byon

Name of organization

Date

representing approximatelypersons. ■

120. RPCNA, 1933 Minutes,78.

121. RPCNA, 1951 Minutes, 76; 1952 Minutes, 117.

122. This is a representation of the original “Petition for a Christian

World Order” found in the *Covenanter Witness*, November 3, 1943, 324. All typographical errors found in the petition are original to the 1943 petition. The full signature block is omitted in this representation.