

Presbyterians and American  
Culture:  
The Case of the Twentieth Century

Bradley J. Longfield

The Reformed Institute  
January 2015

# Introduction

- Presbyterians, as educated and articulate members of the dominant cultural tradition in America, have played a major role in the history of the nation.
- Presbyterians have sought to “transform culture” but they have also been profoundly influenced by the culture. At times, the influence of church on the culture is more pronounced; at other times, the influence of the culture on the church increases.
- Values derived from Christian convictions and those rooted in non-Christian assumptions may certainly overlap. But they may also be starkly opposed.

# The Contemporary Relationship of Church and Culture:

“The Presbyterian Church (USA) is in the midst of a financial and ecclesiological crisis. The most obvious thing at stake is the size of the national office. The deeper struggle is over the church’s very identity. . . . Unclear identity has led to a struggle to define identity, and the denomination is now experiencing its own version of the culture wars.”

“In concluding that the principal task before the PCUSA is theological, the Lilly studies argue that a new identity can emerge only as the church again reflects on the significance of Jesus Christ. . . . Because of its [the church’s] identity in Jesus Christ, it cannot simply accommodate itself to the culture. It must seek the Christ who acts in the world.”

John Burgess, “Conversation, Conviction, and the Presbyterian Identity Crisis” (*Christian Century*, 1993)

# The Contemporary Relationship of Church and Culture

“On the one hand, the churches of North America have been dislocated from their prior social role of chaplain to the culture and society and have lost their once privileged position of influence. . . . At the same time, the churches have become so accommodated to the American way of life that they are now domesticated, and it is no longer obvious what justifies their existence as particular communities.”

Darrell Guder, *Missional Church* (Eerdmans, 1998)

# The Contemporary Relationship of Church and Culture:

“All across American Christianity today, large swaths have been captured by the spirit of the age. . . . Consumerism, individualism, the therapeutic and managerial ideologies have gone far to undermine the authority of the Christian movement and its traditions.”

“Courtship and marriage, the formation and education of children, the mutual relationships and obligations between the individual and community, vocation, leadership, consumption, leisure, ‘retirement’ and the use of time in the final chapters of life—on these and other matters, Christianity has uncritically assimilated to the dominant ways of life in a manner dubious at the least. Even more, these assimilations arguably compromise the fundamental integrity of its witness to the world.”

James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford Press, 2010)

# Family History

- Teasing apart what is particularly Christian and what is American in the history of the church is not an easy thing. Never are these influences completely unalloyed.
- Inasmuch as we can always confuse the Christian faith with the values of the era in which we live, the study of history can offer a helpful perspective from which to examine the struggles in our own time.

# Late-Nineteenth Century Developments

- Darwinism
- Historical Criticism of the Bible
- Advent of Social Sciences
- Developments in Communication and Transportation
- Urbanization
- Secularization

# Henry Sloane Coffin



- New York native. Educated at Yale, Edinburgh, Marburg, Union (New York). Leader of Liberal Presbyterians
- Need for theological adaptation. Creeds were “man’s best attempt . . . to express his religious experience.”
- Immanence of God. God was present in and revealed through the progress of history.
- Optimistic view of history and humanity
- Importance of religious experience
- Bible as the “record of the progressive religious experience of Israel culminating in Jesus Christ.”
- Ethics supplanted doctrine as the center of the faith. The job of the church was to transform the “earth into a household of brethren dwelling together in peace and goodwill.”



# Conservative Response

The 1910 and 1916 General Assemblies affirmed the “five fundamentals”:

- Inerrancy of Scripture
- Virgin Birth
- Substitutionary Atonement
- Bodily Resurrection
- Miracle-working Power of Jesus Christ

# Harry Emerson Fosdick



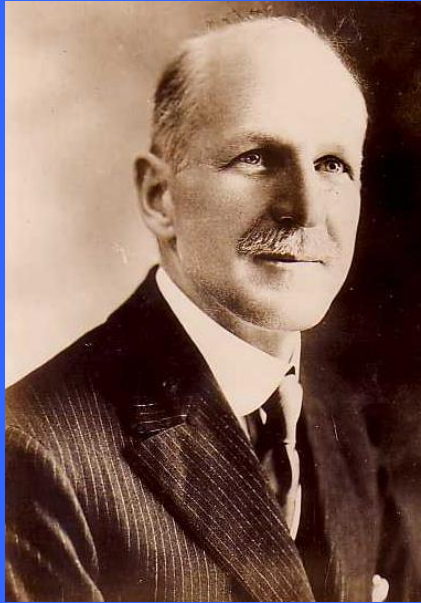
- Liberal Baptist preaching by special arrangement in First Presbyterian Church of New York
- In 1922, preached “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” Contrasted liberal and conservative positions and argued for tolerance as the only way forward

# J. Gresham Machen



- Raised in southern Presbyterian Church. Educated at Johns Hopkins, Princeton, Germany
- Author of *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923). Claimed liberalism had abandoned everything distinctive of Christianity
- Only a rebirth of Christianity could arrest the era's spiritual decline. Influence of Christianity primarily through ideas.
- Founded Westminster Seminary (1929) and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (1936)
- 1923 GA reaffirmed five fundamentals.

# The Auburn Affirmation & The Commission of 1925



- Auburn Affirmation (1924): The five fundamentals were “not the only theories allowed by the Scriptures” and the Confession. Doctrinal declarations needed the consent of the presbyteries.
- General Assembly Moderator Charles Erdman, in 1925, threatened by a liberal schism, moved a Special Commission to study the unrest of the church.
- Commission of 1925: Recommended abandoning the fundamentals as requirements without disavowing them as doctrines. Noted that such requirements should have been approved by the presbyteries.

# Pearl Buck



- Daughter of southern Presbyterian missionaries, wife of northern Presbyterian missionary, and missionary to China herself
- Winner of Pulitzer Prize (1932) for *The Good Earth*
- Through 1910s sought to “bring others to Christ”; by 1920s was warning that missionaries “would see some cherished dogmas cast aside,” and by 1930s was questioning the divinity or even historical existence of Jesus
- 1933 resigned as a missionary
- Became “a secular missionary, bringing the gospels of civil rights and cross-cultural understanding to people on two continents.”

# Francis P. Miller: “The Church Against the World”



- Co-author of “The Church Against the World,” a neo-orthodox manifesto (1935)
- “A process which began with a culture molded by religious faith has ended with a religious faith molded by a national culture.”
- The church needed to recapture the understanding of God’s sovereignty and humanity’s sinfulness
- Echoed by
  - Elmer Homrighausen at Princeton Seminary:  
“The pulpit has become impotent,” because sermons,  
“minimize the distinction between God and man.”
  - Joseph Haroutunian at McCormick:  
“Protestant thought of today is a religious version of  
the mind of our age.”

# Henrietta Mears: “Grandmother of Modern Evangelicalism”



- Director of Christian Education, First Presbyterian Church, Hollywood (1927)
- Sunday School enrollment jumped from 450 to 4,200 in 2 years
- Gospel Light Press; “Bible-based, Christ centered, child-centered”
- “Every [Sunday School] lesson should always contain the WAY OF SALVATION.”
- Sunday School teachers should fight the twin perils of “secularism and communism.”
- Only a Christian revival would prevent “the complete annihilation of civilization.”

# John Foster Dulles



- Raised in pious liberal Presbyterian household in NY
- Educated at Princeton and George Washington University Law School
- Belief in God, in a divine moral law, and “spiritual dignity,” was necessary for a “just and durable peace.”
- Chaired FCC Commission on a Just and Durable Peace. Authored “Six Pillars of Peace” which reflected the “American democratic faith”: fundamental moral law, free and responsible individuals, mission of America to promote first two.
- Of all groups “the church could make the greatest contribution to world order.”



# A Christian America in a Christian World



- In the wake of World War II, mainline churches engaged in evangelistic crusades to proclaim the Gospel and combat the twin threats of Catholicism and Communism.
- John Mackay, President of Princeton Seminary, argued that unless the church pursued aggressive evangelism, “the secular order will be organized by Communism and the religious order by Romanism.”
- In 1957, Charles Templeton, evangelism secretary for the northern Presbyterian Church, called for the church to broaden its definition of evangelism to include “the attempt to end racial segregation, to get better housing, to feed the hungry, . . . to halt injustice and work for peace.”
- By the 1960s such arguments to link evangelism and social action were becoming more prominent.

# Fuller Seminary



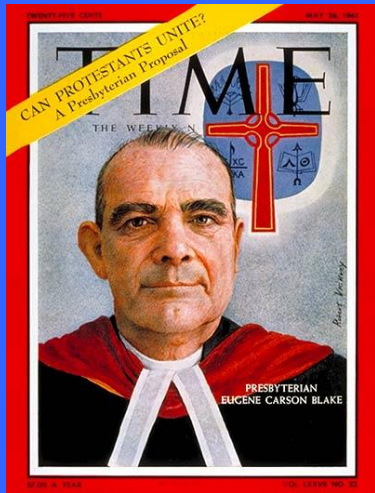
- Harold Ockenga, first president of Fuller Seminary, founded in 1947, declared the seminary was to be a “new Princeton” to train Christian leaders and save “Western civilization.”
- Charles Fuller, like John Mackay at Princeton, was concerned about the threats of communism and Catholicism.
- Early tensions between Fuller and the local presbyteries dissipated over time as Fuller embraced a “broader evangelicalism.” By 1980s, Fuller was one of the largest educators of Presbyterian clergy.

# Catherine Marshall



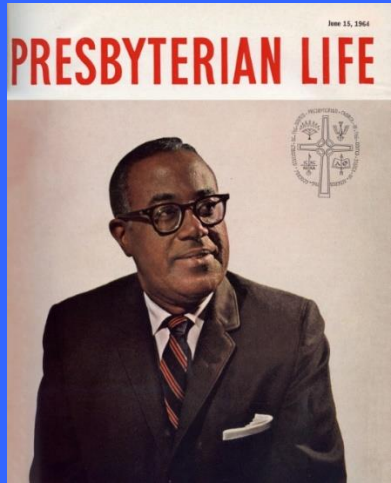
- Daughter of PCUS minister and graduate of Agnes Scott College
- Widow of Peter Marshall, chaplain of US Senate and pastor of New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, Washington, D. C.
- Wrote *A Man Called Peter*, in 1951 which was on the best seller list for 3 years and turned into a hit movie
- Struggled with the conflict between the traditional roles she had adopted and the life of a successful career woman
- “The issues she was forced to confront . . . were precisely those that would be eagerly taken up by an entire generation of American young women, including many ministers’ wives, in the decades that followed.”

# Eugene Carson Blake



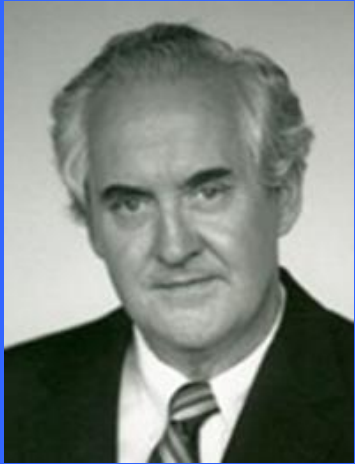
- Stated Clerk of northern Presbyterian Church, 1951-66; President of National Council of Churches, 1954-57; elected to Central and Executive Committees of World Council of Churches, 1954
- 1960 proposes a “Reunion of Christ’s Church”; in the face of “increasingly secular” culture Christians needed a united front
- Results in the formation of Consultation on Church Union (COCU)
- Sociologist Robert Lee, 1960: “the increase in church unity springs in considerable measure from the pressures of a growing cultural unity within American society.”
- By late 1960s COCU was in decline. The disuniting of America contributed to the disuniting of ecumenism.

# Presbyterians and Civil Rights



- Blake saw the crusade for church unity as closely connected with the civil rights movement.
- 1958 survey: “In its racial behavior the local church tends to reflect the prevailing winds of the social atmosphere that surrounds it.”
- Blake in 1958: “There is no segregation at the Cross . . . the segregation of people on the grounds of race has no place in a church or society that calls itself Christian.”
- 1964 - Edler Hawkins elected Moderator of the General Assembly of the northern Church; both the northern and southern churches abolished segregated presbyteries.

# Presbyterian Division and Reunion



- 1973, PCA divided from PCUS : “a diluted theology, a gospel tending toward humanism, an unbiblical view of marriage and divorce, the ordination of women [and] financing of abortion on socioeconomic grounds”
- 1981, EPC divided from PCUSA over doctrine and polity
- 1983, Reunion of the United Presbyterian Church in the USA and the Presbyterian Church in the US
- Donald Shriver: “Southern Presbyterians [were moving] with the mainstream of American culture.”
- J. Randolph Taylor: “Now that we have made peace among ourselves, we can address peace in the world. We need to work for a just church in a just world and we need continually to strive for peace.”

# 2015

- Since the reunion of the northern and southern churches in 1983, the communion has seemingly moved from one crisis to another. Behind all of these is a massive hemorrhage in membership – a decline of 50% since 1965.
- Aggravated by question of theological identity and the church's relation to the culture.
- No way to completely disentangle church and culture, but the church needs to continually assess what in its life is congruent with the Gospel.
- The church, as it has become more theologically diverse, has been driven to address difficult issues more as matters of polity than theology.

# Where Do We Go From Here?

- When we argue about abortion or theology or sexual practice we are asking “Who are we as a church?” Given the theological diversity in the church, the question that is front and center is “What is it that binds us together, that distinguishes us from other bodies of Christians and from the culture at large?”
- How can the church—in the midst of its theological diversity and situated in a secular culture—develop a healthy sense of identity that can empower vital worship and faithful mission?



# Congregational Life

- If denominational identity and culture is not nurtured at the congregational level, it will likely not be nurtured anywhere.
- “The most fundamental problem for the ebbing mainstream, is the lack of compelling reasons for people to participate. . . . Mainstream churches are drifting, and they are drifting within an unreality because mainstream churches, by and large, continue to cling to an establishment model of being THE church, when in fact they no longer have the captive culture or subculture for such a model to work.”
- The primary mission of congregations is “to provide a setting for religious experience and answer ultimate questions.”

# Congregational Life

- Clergy “fail to recognize the extent to which they have accommodated to the wider culture—and thus the extent to which their sermons fall on deaf ears because people are hearing nothing new, nothing that challenges them to live any differently than their neighbors who have no interest in religion.”

Robert Wuthnow, *Crisis in the Churches* (Oxford University Press, 1997)

- “Few active Presbyterians spend much time talking or learning about matters pertaining to religion. . . . Presbyterians still say grace at meals, but they rarely have family devotions or read the Bible together, and religion is not a frequent topic of family conversation.”

Dean Hoge et al., *Vanishing Boundaries* (Westminster/John Knox, 1994)

# Congregational Life

- “American young people are theoretically fine with religious faith – but it does not concern them very much, and is not durable enough to survive after they graduate from high school. . . . The hot lava core of Christianity, the story of God’s courtship with us through Jesus Christ . . . has been muted in many congregations, replaced by an ecclesial complacency that convinces youth that not much is at stake.”

Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian* (Oxford University Press, 2010)

- Mainline churchgoers, “who solely identify themselves with the privatized public culture . . . carry with them strong taboos against religious talk . . . Such privatization, when carried within the walls of the church, robs religiously based ties of their religious content and greatly limits their ability to transmit religious identity.”

Jackson Carroll and Wade Clark Roof, ed., *Beyond Establishment* (Westminster/John Knox, 1993)

# Congregational Life

“The primary source of the malaise of the church is the loss of a distinctive Christian message and of the theological and biblical competence that makes its preaching effective. . . . The only skill which the preacher has—or the church for that matter—which is not found with greater excellence somewhere else, is theology, in particular the skill to interpret and apply the Word of God in sermon, teaching, and pastoral care.”

John Leith, *Reformed Imperative* (Westminster, 1988)

# Congregational Life

“There is no reason the members of a nonfundamentalist congregation could not sit down and ask themselves . . . what, if anything, they are prepared to be serious about and then do it. . . . they could center on just a few things at the start, but those things would be binding on all members. Perhaps choosing one or two of the ten commandments would be a bit severe as a beginning, so they might decide to join together in Bible study one evening a week; not every night as some monastic communities or Jehovah’s Witnesses do; maybe a trial period of three months would be as strenuous as could be expected for beginners. This *reductio ad absurdum* may suggest how far most mainline churches are from serious discipleship.”

Dean Kelley, “Commentary: Is Religion a Dependent Variable?” in *Understanding Church Growth and Decline* (Pilgrim Press, 1979)

# Sabbath Practice

- From the start of the Presbyterian Church in America, Sabbath observance was a major emphasis of the faith.
- 1948 PCUS: Many members “piously recite the Ten Commandments, the confession and creeds, observe the sacrifices and feasts on a Sabbath morning; [then] go to the movies, the races, or athletic contests in the afternoon; [and] to a cocktail party in the evening.”
- “By the 1950s the Presbyterian Church was a relatively undemanding place to be, an attractive spot for people who were repelled by the stern do’s and don’ts of their upbringing, but who still wanted a Christian home base for themselves and their children.”

Benton Johnson, “Sabbath Observance” in *Presbyterian Predicament* (Westminster/John Knox, 1990)

# Sabbath Practice

- The problem is that for decades Presbyterians have “made choices that aided their children to be world-conscious, open, autonomous, and . . . not committed to specific traditions of the church.” Moreover, Presbyterians did not adopt new disciplines to replace those they were abandoning. The result is that “The children have asked over and over again what is distinctive about Presbyterianism . . . And why they should believe or cherish it.”

Dean Hoge et al., *Vanishing Boundaries* (Westminster/John Knox, 1994)

- “Good Sabbaths make good Christians by regularly reminding us of God’s creative, liberating, and redeeming presence, not only in words but also through a practice we do together in response to that presence.”

Dorothy Bass, “Keeping Sabbath” (*Christian Century*, 1997)

# Conclusion

Renewed identity and unity will not come without Presbyterians recapturing a sense of, and appreciation for, the richness of the Presbyterian heritage and rebuilding the personal disciplines necessary for sustaining a faithful community. This will entail the building of congregations where laity are schooled in the language of the faith and the nurturing of disciplines and practices that reflect the values of the kingdom of God rather than the prevailing culture.



# Conclusion

“For too long the church has relinquished her role as a teacher to society. Instead of inspiring the culture it capitulates to the ethos of the world. . . . The church must rediscover herself, learn to savor her speech, delight in telling her stories, and confidently pass on what she has received. Only then can she draw people away from the course and superficial culture surrounding us into the abundance of life in Christ.”

Robert Wilken: “The Church’s Way of Speaking” (*First Things*, Aug./Sept. 2005)