

## **CHAPTER 2      The Historic Theological Controversies within the Presbyterian Church**

### **2.1      Introduction**

This writer started preparation for this thesis by reading numerous books by Presbyterian scholars. In their theological and exegetical work, they wrestle with the biblical texts which deal with same-gender sexual activity and/or relationships. However, their academic, theological, and exegetical analyses regarding what Scripture says or does not say about same-gender relationships, how Scripture is interpreted in its historical context, how and if these texts apply to committed, monogamous, partnered gay and lesbian Christians today, how these principles should be applied to either the ordination and/or installation, or same-gender marriage debates have not transferred over into the wider church debate.

In fact, theological discussion is virtually absent in the governing and decision-making process of the PC(USA); it has been replaced with polity. The most obvious place where the interpretation and application of Scripture is absent is in the two bodies, the General Assembly and GAPJC, which formulate the policy and polity of the PC(USA).

After completing the review of the historic period from the 1970s to 2009 in the UPCUSA, PCUS, and PC(USA), which for the most part deals with polity and rarely with any theological discussion or statements, this writer discovered the answer to this puzzling development. The modern-day debate over gay and lesbian ordination and/or installation, and same-gender blessing and marriage needs to be framed and understood against the background of past theological controversies, most notably in the 1830s and 1920s in the PCUSA. This time period shaped how the various predecessor churches of the PC(USA) resolved their theological conflict; namely, through polity and not through theology.

Without understanding the historical build-up of the various sides currently represented in the PC(USA), one will not fully comprehend how polity was used to

make a theological statement about ordination and/or installation, and same-gender blessing and marriage; bringing us to an impasse since 1978. Once again, a schism is looming. Thousands of members and tens of congregations have already left, and many are on the verge of leaving the PC(USA) for the EPC. Paragraph G-6.0106b, which was introduced into the *Book of Order* in 1997, needs to be understood within the broader context of past controversies, and how the result of the controversies led the conservative Presbyterian movement to learn from the liberal Presbyterians how to use polity to achieve their goal.

Rogers (1995:XV, 7) views both the past and present controversies as an internal conflict over worldviews. Thus, how these various worldviews contributed to the major controversies in the history of the Presbyterian Church, and how these worldviews continue to influence the debate in the PC(USA) today, will be discussed in this chapter.

## **2.2 The American Worldview Redefined**

Rogers (1995:13) asserts that the early American worldview consisted of six motifs: separatism; election as God's chosen people; revivalism; common sense; moralism; and millennialism. He calls it the American evangelical/mainstream worldview. This worldview was shattered in the early nineteenth century by the issue of slavery, which led to the Civil War, and by Darwin's theory of Evolution (:15). After the 1860s, one group became known as the liberals or modernists who adopted the new scientific worldview and revised the Christian faith to fit it (:16). They see the church as an institution, but their loyalty does not keep them from leaving the denomination for another (Weston 2003:2).

The second group was the fundamentalists or conservatives who held on to the earlier worldview (Rogers 1995:16). Their focus was not the institutional church, but the distinctive doctrines. Their loyalty to the doctrine sometimes leads them to exit the denomination in favour of a pure sect (Weston 2003:2).

The third group was the majority who realised their earlier worldview was not identical with their Christian faith. They held onto the essentials of the faith and also changed their cultural attitudes and values. They were the moderate middle or centrists (Rogers 1995:17) or loyalists (Weston 2003:2-3). From the 1860s to the 1930s, they were doctrinally conservative, but culturally, politically, and socially flexible. They held the leadership of the church until early in the twentieth century, when the liberals took over the leadership (Rogers 1995:17). Weston (2003:41) argues that the centre-right coalition that had the run the church, since the Briggs case in the 1890s, was displaced by the centre-left coalition that has run the church after the *Special Commission of 1925*. Thus, both the conservatives and liberals vie for the loyalists, creating a loyalist competition, which Weston calls “the competitive church” (:2-3).

The fourth group, Pentecostals, appeared in the early twentieth century. This group had some influence on mainline churches through the charismatic movement in the 1960s (Rogers 1995:18).

### **2.3 The Rights and Responsibilities of Governing Bodies**

Two groups of Presbyterians existed in the 1700s, namely the Scotch-Irish group (not Scots or Scottish), and the English-Welsh group (Rogers 1995:27) or New England group (Balmer & Fitzmier 1994:25). The first American presbytery, also known as the Presbytery or the General presbytery, was formed in 1706. It was organised “from the ground up” and not “from the top down,” which is the central characteristic of American Presbyterianism (Loetscher 1983:61). The guides were the Westminster Confession of Faith and Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms, the Directory for Worship, and the Form of Government, known as the Westminster Standards (Smylie 1996:34). In 1729, they were included in the Constitution (Weston 2003:9).

On the one hand, Rev. J Dickinson, from New England, favoured limiting the power of governing bodies (Coalter, Wheeler & Wilkinson 2005:13). He was also uneasy with the Irish emphasis that clergy subscribe to the Westminster Standards, which he believed put it on an equal footing with the Bible (Smylie 1996:45). The English-

Welsh or New England group, which came to be known as the New Side and later as the New School, focused on the needs of the congregations and utilised lay people. A genuine religious experience was more important than the correct formulation of doctrine (Rogers 1995:28).

On the other hand, the Scotch-Irish group emphasised the Scottish model and was known as the Old Side and later as the Old School. They were concerned with church government and the larger bodies, and formed church agencies to meet the community need. They required highly trained ministers and also precise polity and confessional statements (Rogers 1995:28). They insisted that Scripture be interpreted through representative assemblies that could devise creeds and adopt statements of confession (Coalter, Wheeler & Wilkinson 2005:13-14). Trinterud (1949 in Weston 1997:3) asserts that the ethnic character of the two groups might have disappeared, but that their different tendencies remained. Thus, diversity characterised the Presbyterian Church from the onset.

The two views both prevailed when the 1797 General Assembly of the PCUSA adopted the “Radical Principles,” which became “The Historic Principles of Church Government” (G-1.0400 *Book of Order*):

. . . a larger part of the Church . . . should govern a smaller . . . a majority shall govern; and consequently appeals may be carried from lower to higher governing bodies, till they be finally decided by the collected wisdom and united voice of the whole Church. For these principles and this procedure, the example of the apostles and the practice of the primitive church are considered as authority (PC(USA) Minutes 1983:153).

(For a full discussion, see Chapter 5.2.1.1.3). The power of higher governing bodies, the synods and the General Assembly, were balanced by an equally strong emphasis on the power of sessions and presbyteries. Coalter *et al* (2005:14) point out that the argument is used that presbyteries existed before the General Synod or General Assembly existed; in fact, the presbyteries brought both into being.

At the 1789 General Assembly, the Constitution of the PCUSA was adopted and consisted of the Westminster Standards, which are the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, the Directory of Worship, and the Plan of Government and Order, as amended (Weston 1997:3), also known as *The Form of Government and Discipline* (Smylie 1996:63).

The Constitution stated:

To the [General] Assembly also belongs the power of consulting, reasoning, and judging, in controversies respecting doctrine and discipline (Constitution of the PCUSA 1789: Chapter XI).

The Constitution organised the church as a system of courts in which the standards of faith and practice would be enforced (Weston 1997:4). Thus, for decades the presbyteries, synods and General Assemblies were called and viewed as ecclesiastical courts.

The *Special Commission of 1925* affirmed that the powers of the presbyteries were paramount (PCUSA Minutes 1927:79) and general and inherent, while the General Assembly's were "specific, delegated, and limited, having been conferred upon it by the Presbyteries . . ." (:62). (For a full discussion, see Chapter 2.11).

The PCUS, formed in 1861, held the New England view of Dickinson of the early 1700s, severely limiting the powers of all governing bodies above the presbytery level. It recognised the General Assembly as court of final appeal in specific cases, but its deliverances were "didactic, advisory, and monitoring" (quoted in Coalter, Wheeler & Wilkinson 2005:15). Again, in 1898, a proposal came for the General Assembly to set the fundamentals of the system of doctrine in the Westminster Standards. The PCUS declined to adopt binding fundamentals (:15 footnote 28).

However, in the United Presbyterian Church in North America (UPCNA) tradition, the General Assembly was pre-eminent and was called the "great presbytery in which the entire church is represented" (Coalter, Wheeler & Wilkinson 2005:16). Thus, when the PCUSA, with its increased focus on the rights and powers of presbyteries from 1927, joined the UPCNA in 1958 to form the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (UPCUSA), a tension was built into the system (:15-16). Then, in June 1983, the UPCUSA and PCUS re-united after 122 years to form the PC(USA) and healed a schism which existed since the Civil War.

Thus, currently in the PC(USA), there seems to be general agreement that presbyteries and sessions have the right and responsibility to examine, ordain and/or install their officers, and to decide who may be admitted to membership in congregations and presbyteries. They may petition higher governing bodies, synods

and the General Assembly, through overtures, to take action. Presbyteries also have the right to affirm or veto changes in the church's Constitution. The General Assembly, synods, and presbyteries, acting as higher governing bodies, have the duty of oversight and the right to review the decisions of lower governing bodies in specific cases.

In Chapters 3 and 5 of this study, the issue of whether a General Assembly has the right to issue an Authoritative Interpretation of the Constitution which is binding on lower governing bodies will be discussed. The issue was laid to rest in 1987 when the presbyteries ratified an amendment to the Constitution to confer that right on the General Assembly and its GAPJC (G-13.0103r *Book of Order*) (see (PC(USA) Minutes 1987:32, 143-144; and Chapter 5.8.1).

#### **2.4 The Adopting Act of 1729**

Subscription became a divisive issue in the 1720s between the different presbyteries at the meetings of the Synod of Philadelphia. In 1721, Rev. G Gillespie of New Castle Presbytery requested subscription to the Westminster standards. In 1722, Dickinson of the New England Presbytery warned against strict creedal formulas. In 1727, Rev. J Thompson of New Castle Presbytery introduced measures to call for subscription from all ministers and candidates (Balmer & Fitzmier 1994:25-26). Dickinson again spoke out against subscription, arguing that it would elevate the Westminster Confession of Faith to the level of Scripture. The New England Presbyterians supported Dickinson and a less rigorous position of subscription, while the Scotch-Irish favoured subscription which would ensure correct theology (:26, Loetscher 1983:64).

At the 1729 Synod meeting both sides had lined up their arguments, but they reached a compromise with the *Adopting Act of 1729*, which was written mostly by Dickinson (Balmer & Fitzmier 1994:26-27). Trinterud (1949:49 in Weston 2003:83) points out that although the subscriptionists had a two-to-one advantage in the Synod, a compromise was reached due to the moderates within both parties.

In the *Adopting Act of 1729*, the Synod declared:

And do therefore agree that all the ministers of the Synod, or that shall hereafter be admitted into this Synod, shall declare their agreement in, and approbation of, the Confession of Faith, with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the Assembly of Divines at Westminster, as being in all the essential and necessary articles, good forms of sound words and systems of Christian doctrine; and do also adopt the said Confession and Catechisms as the confession of our Faith. And we do also agree, that all the presbyteries within our bounds shall always take care not to admit any candidate of the ministry into the exercise of the sacred function, unless he declares his agreement in opinion with all the essential and necessary articles of said Confession, either by subscribing the said Confession of Faith and Catechisms, or by a verbal declaration of their assent thereto, as such minister or candidate for the ministry shall have any scruple with respect to any article or articles of said Confession or Catechisms, he shall at the time of his making said declaration declare his sentiments to the presbytery or Synod, who shall, notwithstanding, admit him to the exercise of the ministry within our bounds and to ministerial communion if the Synod or presbytery shall judge his scruple or mistake to be only about articles not essential and necessary in doctrine, worship or government. But if the Synod or presbytery shall judge such ministers or candidates erroneous in essential and necessary articles of faith, the Synod or presbytery shall declare them incapable [original spelling] of communion with them. And the Synod do solemnly agree, that none of us will traduce or use any opprobrious terms of those that differ from us in these extra-essential and not-necessary points of doctrine, but treat them with the same friendship, kindness, and brotherly love, as if they had not differed from us in such sentiments (*The Adopting Act of 1729*).

The church's General Synod adopted the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms as the standards for ministry, therefore the term *Adopting Act* for the resolution of 1729. The *Adopting Act of 1729* required all ministers to subscribe to "the essential and necessary doctrines of said Confession." Note, the *Adopting Act of 1729* does not specify exactly what the essential and necessary articles are. Weston (2003:84) is correct that the Synod was not even unanimous, otherwise they would have specified what the essential and necessary articles were and there would have been no need for the *Adopting Act*. Rogers (1995:129) states that that not every jot and tittle were meant, but the main principles. Dialogue between the candidate and presbytery would interpret which articles were essential.

Also, any minister could in good conscience declare a scruple to the presbytery or synod in which they declared how they departed from the Westminster Standards. If the problem was not regarding an essential or necessary article, the presbytery had to admit the scrupulous minister. This means that the *Adopting Act of 1729* presumed there were some non-essential parts to the Westminster Standards. Weston (2003:83) points out that it happened that afternoon when all the ministers but one declared their scruple against the 20<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> articles in the Westminster Confession,



regarding the role of the civil power in the church and the civil magistrate. They were not relevant to the colonial context and were set aside by the Synod as not requiring assent (Coalter, Wheeler & Wilkinson 2005:9).

The *Adopting Act of 1729* was both flexible and ambiguous. It confirmed that some beliefs and practices were indispensable, but that “differences always have existed and have been allowed” (PCUSA Minutes 1868:33 quoted in Coalter, Wheeler & Wilkinson 2005:9-10).

In 1736, the Synod was asked to clarify whether it had adopted the whole Westminster Standards. The Synod replied that it had and declared their “firm attachment to our good old received doctrines contained in said Confessions. . .” (quoted in Weston 2003:85). Despite this statement, later Presbyterian scholars disagree regarding what happened. Hodge, from the Old School, thought this proved the *Adopting Act of 1729* required strict subscription from the beginning to the Westminster Standards, except for the two Articles. Briggs, from the New School, thought the *Adopting Act of 1729* was broad and flexible, but became stricter after the 1736 synodical declaration. Weston (ibid) argues that the 1736 declaration did not change the flexibility of the *Adopting Act of 1729*. It allowed room for each presbytery to set different standards from others. This issue of variant local standards, and not national standards, would be cardinal in the 2005 *Peace, Unity, and Purity* Report (see Chapter 5.49.1).

The principle of scrupling and ordaining bodies defining the essentials from the *Adopting Act of 1729* is the crux of the whole ordination and/or installation debate. Since 1729, the Presbyterian Church has never specified exactly what the essential tenets of the Westminster Standards or Reformed faith are. Each presbytery sets its own standards for what the essential and necessary articles are within the limits of the Confession and Catechisms (see Weston 2003:84; Coalter, Wheeler & Wilkinson 2005:10). Only two exceptions have occurred in the entire history of the Presbyterian Church. From 1910-1927, the “five points” or “five fundamentals” were affirmed as essentials and were revoked by the *Special Commission of 1925* through the 1927 General Assembly (see Chapter 2.11). From February-June 2008, the GAPJC decision in the Bush ruling stated that G-6.0106b was an essential of Reformed faith



(see Chapter 5.56). This erroneous interpretation was revoked by a new Authoritative Interpretation by the 2008 General Assembly (see Chapter 5.60.2).

Additionally, the *Book of Order* does not specify what the essentials are when officers - deacons, elders, and ministers of the Word and Sacrament - are asked the constitutional Questions to be ordained and/or installed:

Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will you be instructed and led by those confessions as you lead the people of God? (W-4.4003c *Book of Order*).

Every ordaining and/or installing body - session and presbytery - defines the essentials, not the synod or the General Assembly. This has been the principle since 1729.

The *Adopting Act of 1729* was, however, a temporary compromise. The Presbyterian Church would again enter into controversy and split in 1741 during the Great Awakening.

## **2.5 The Great Awakening and the Split in 1741**

The first American presbytery was organised in 1706 in Philadelphia by eight ministers (Balmer & Fitzmier 1994:24). The Synod of Philadelphia was organised in 1716 with four presbyteries and met in 1717 (Loetscher 1983:63). The Synod acted as a General Synod, to which all ministers belonged, and therefore, most historians write it as “Synod” or “General Synod” and not “synod,” to differentiate it from later synods after the General Assembly was formed in 1788.

The Synod was held together by the *Adopting Act of 1729*. After a continued battle, regarding revivals which broke out and resulted in controversies over Revs. J Edwards and G Whitefield, the situation was driven to a breaking point (see Balmer & Fitzmier 1994:27-30 for detailed discussion).

At the 1741 Synod meeting, Rev. R Cross produced a document, the *Protestation*, which declared that the New Brunswick revivalists had forfeited their membership in

the Synod by declaring their powers over ordination. A majority of the Synod hastily signed the *Protestation*, thereby expelling some ministers (Balmer & Fitzmier 194:30). Additionally, the 1741 meeting was poorly attended and the Presbytery of New York did not attend. The Old Lights kicked out the New Lights' itinerant preachers and New Brunswick Presbytery (Westerkamp 2000:1-2, 11, 15). The split was a direct result of revivalism and the Great Awakening of the 1730s, 1740s and 1750s, and the issue of itinerant preachers (:2, 11). Rogers (1995:128) differentiates between those who wanted a revivalist conversion and those who wanted intellectual subscription to the Westminster Confession. Balmer & Fitzmier (1994:30) point out that the anti-revivalists in the Synod wanted to restrict itinerancy by checking the spread of the revival.

At the time of the 1741 split, the Synod consisted of only six presbyteries. The Presbytery of New York sided with the excluded group and requested in 1745 to join the Presbytery of New Brunswick to form a second synod, the Synod of New York, which the Synod of Philadelphia gladly approved (Westerkamp 2000:1). The Synod of Philadelphia became known as the Old Side and the Synod of New York as the New Side (Balmer & Fitzmier 1994:30).

During the seventeen year-long split from 1741-1758, the New Side grew and the Old Side declined. In 1758, the Synods of New York and Philadelphia met and healed the schism (Balmer & Fitzmier 1994:32). Westerkamp (2000:14) points out that in the 1758 *Plan of Union*, both sides reached compromise positions on issues that divided them: ministerial qualifications and intrusions (public slandering). The new synod also ratified the Awakening as a work of the Holy Spirit (:15).

The *Plan of Union* also allowed latitude in the acceptance of the Westminster Standards, and it affirmed that the powers of ordination lay with the presbyteries (Balmer & Fitzmier 1994:32) in accordance with the *Adopting Act of 1729*. Loetscher (1983:70) notes that an important new factor was added. All candidates had to be examined on their "experimental acquaintance with religion." This struck a balance between the validity of individual experience and conformity to community norms.

The Old Side and New Side (Old Lights and New Lights) would continue their residual animosity in the arena of their various theological institutions. Princeton Theological Seminary became a bastion of the New Side, but the Old Side continuously tried to wrestle control away (Balmer & Fitzmier 1994:32). The underlying issue of subscription would continue to divide the sides and erupt again in the 1830s.

## 2.6 The Formation of a General Assembly

After 1774, clergy in the PCUSA looked at reorganising the Synod into smaller synods (Balmer & Fitzmier 1994:37). Soon, debates occurred over the national structure and which form of government should be used. The 1786 Synod appointed a Special Committee to draft a plan of government. The 1787 Synod heard the report and sent it to the presbyteries for ratification. The Synod approved four synods within the church (:38). It also condemned slavery and urged Presbyterians to work towards abolition (Smylie 1996:87). In 1788, the first General Assembly was organised with four synods and met in 1789 (Loetscher 1983:76-77). Scholars use these dates alternatively and this writer will differentiate where possible. The denomination took the name The Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA), the name that the Old Side and New Side had both used since the 1837 schism.

The Synod of 1788 also amended the Westminster Confession of Faith and Larger Catechism to agree with the American theory of separation between church and state (Loetscher 1983:77). The adopted Constitution provided for subscription to the Westminster Confession and Larger and Shorter Catechisms which contained the “necessary and essential” articles of Christian faith and life and the “system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures” following the *Adopting Act of 1729* (Smylie 1996:62-63). The Synod reaffirmed the right of presbyteries to determine whether a person differed from the standards, but also allowed freedom of conscience in interpreting the doctrine of the church. It also accepted *The Form of Government and Discipline* (:63).

One should note that the principles of church order formulated by the Synods of New York and Philadelphia in the early history of the Presbyterian Church were included in 1797 in the *Historic Principles of Church Order* in the prologue of the Form of Government of the new General Assembly of the PCUSA (Coalter, Wheeler & Wilkinson 2005:1). Thus, the Form of Government from the beginning until today begins with principles, and not rules.

The American model focused on the power and autonomy of the presbyteries, the British and Scottish model saw the General Assembly as the ecclesial authority. The American Church saw the synods and General Assemblies merely as agencies for unifying the life of the church (Balmer & Fitzmier 1994:37). The Synod of 1788 also reinforced the representative system of clergy and laity who serve on all four levels of governing bodies and the right of congregations to elect ministers and lay leaders (not deacons and elders at this point in time) and presbyteries to examine, ordain, and install ministers (Smylie 1996:63-64).

One has to keep the aforementioned focus in mind when dealing with the gay and lesbian ordination and/or installation debate. For hundreds of years, the Presbyterian Church has been weary of national bodies prescribing what ordaining bodies should do, and has left the power and right to ordain and/or install solely to presbyteries (and later to sessions for elders and deacons). Thus, a synod or General Assembly is an ecclesiastical body without any ordaining power, but they have the power to review ordinations and/or installations of ministers, and later, of deacons and elders as well.

## **2.7 The New School-Old School Schism in the 1830s**

The Scottish and Irish people, who came to the USA in huge numbers in the eighteenth century, disagreed over polity with the English or New England Presbyterians. The former held the Westminster Confession of Faith as official creed, while it had not been adopted in England (Moorhead 2000:20).

In 1801, Presbyterians joined with Congregationalists through a *Plan of Union* (Balmer & Fitzmier 1994:47). This troubled the Old School since the

Congregationalists did not require formal subscription to the Westminster Standards (:48). Dr. C Hodge from Princeton Seminary led the Old School in its opposition to the 1801 *Plan of Union* in the 1830s (:66). At the 1831 General Assembly, the Old School tried to enforce doctrinal conformity, but was outnumbered by the New School. In 1835, they circulated a document, *Act and Testimony*, which warned of the prevalence of unsound doctrine and lax discipline (:47, 66).

In 1835, Rev. A Barnes was charged by the Old School Synod of Philadelphia that he denied the doctrine of original sin. The synod suspended him for a year, and he appealed to the 1836 General Assembly. After a trial, with a New School majority, he was acquitted. The Old School insisted upon separation. At the 1837 General Assembly, the Old School mustered a majority and abrogated the 1801 *Plan of Union* with the Congregationalists, made the action retroactive, and declared that the four synods, predominantly New School and formed under the *Plan of Union*, were illegal (Balmer & Fitzmier 1994:48, 66).

The New School and Old School split in 1837. The New School refused to accept the 1837 ruling and, at the 1838 General Assembly, insisted that the 1837 acts be declared null and void. The Old School moderator in 1838 refused to recognise the New School representatives and they then immediately formed their own General Assembly. Both groups called themselves the PCUSA (Balmer & Fitzmier 1994:48). The New School continued to try and heal the split, while the Old School insisted that a purge was necessary (:49).

Scholars agree the main reason for the 1837 split was theological issues and disagreements between the Old School and New School. Minor reasons for the split were the relationship with the Congregationalists (Moorhead 2000:19, Rogers 1995:28, Balmer & Fitzmier 1994:41) and slavery (Rogers 1995:28, Balmer & Fitzmier 1994:55). Moorhead (2000:28-29) disagrees that slavery and abolition were the main cause of the split, while Loetscher (1983:92-95) argues that it played a big role in the split. An abolitionist, Mr. W L Garrison, considered the division between Old School and New School as a sign of the coming division in the nation. His words came true in the 1840s when the Methodists and the Baptists were divided over

slavery, and the nation split, leading to the American Civil War in the 1860s (Smylie 1996:80).

Again, a controversy involved differences on how far the Westminster Standards were authoritative. The Old School viewed it as an absolute standard, the New School as “flexibility” and “loose construction.”

Beuttler (1999:246) contends that the Old School used “polity” to resolve a question of “theology” and theological issues were not resolved through debate, but through political [sic- polity] means. It created peace, but drove out the minority, which formed the New School denomination. The New School, however, did not want the division, and issued the Auburn Declaration in 1837 confessing their commitment to the Presbyterian Church (Smylie 1996:80).

After the 1837 schism, Princeton Seminary emerged as the major apologist for the Old School (Balmer & Fitzmier 1994:53). The New School continued to work with the Congregationalists, but they pulled out of the *Plan of Union* in 1852 (Smylie 1996:86). The New School continued to push for abolition and, in 1857, its Southern section, favouring slavery, split off to form the United Synod of the PCUSA (:88) or the United Synod of the South (Balmer & Fitzmier 1994:72). In 1861, the Old School’s Southern section split off as well, to form the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America (Balmer & Fitzmier 1994:114), which merged with the United Synod of the South (or PCUSA) in 1864 to form the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. (PCUS) (:72).

Thus, the one church in 1837 was split into four churches by 1861, with both the Old School and New School having Northern and Southern branches. One division was healed in 1869, when the Northern bodies of the New School and Old School reunited to form the PCUSA (Rogers 1995:28). The PCUS merged with the UPCUSA in 1983 to form the PC(USA), healing the splits from 1837 and 1861 (see *A Chronology of American Presbyterianism*, pages xv-xvi).

## 2.8 The Briggs Case

A controversy regarding biblical interpretation developed in the PCUSA during the 1880s. In the seventeenth century, “lower criticism” had been developed which examined and dated manuscripts to put the oldest and most reliable text together (Rogers 1995:95). This was the method used at Princeton Seminary, which had trained most of the Presbyterian ministers up to that point (:96) and who were the majority at the General Assembly meetings.

Dr. C A Briggs was a Presbyterian professor at the liberal Union Seminary in New York in the New School tradition and the recognised leader of the liberal wing of the denomination. He also led the call to revise the Westminster Confession of Faith to a new and simpler creed. The conservatives saw it as an attempt to undermine the distinctive Calvinist doctrines, especially predestination (Weston 1997:7).

In 1891, Briggs was transferred to a new chair at Union Seminary. In his inaugural address, *The Authority of Holy Scripture*, he defended the supernatural inspiration of Scripture, and higher criticism which took into account the human character of the biblical writings. He denied the mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch and the unitary authorship of the book of Isaiah, as well as the inerrancy of Scripture developed by Princeton Seminary. His address was widely published and alarmed conservatives who viewed higher criticism as heretical (Weston 1997:7).

B B Warfield, A A Hodge, and the faculty of Princeton Seminary opposed Briggs and defended the evangelical/mainstream worldview with its Scottish Common Sense and inerrancy approach to Scripture. Several presbyteries sent overtures to the General Assembly to address Briggs’ heretical statements, and the 1891 General Assembly vetoed his appointment to Union Seminary (Longfield 2000:36-37).

In November 1891, after conservatives convinced the Presbytery of New York to hold a heresy trial against Briggs, the case was dismissed. In 1892, he was tried again and acquitted (Balmer & Fitzmier 1994:57). The 1892 General Assembly endorsed a statement, the *Portland Deliverance*, on the doctrine of biblical inerrancy (Longfield



2000:37) and against higher criticism (Weston 1997:8). Briggs and others questioned the constitutionality of this decision since it did not seek the concurrence of the presbyteries (ibid).

In 1892, Briggs was tried a third time in the Presbytery of New York and again acquitted. The prosecuting committee then took the case to the 1892 General Assembly for an appellate trial by the entire assembly. This bypassed the court of appeal - the Synod of New York. Briggs protested this action, but the General Assembly agreed to the appeal. The 1893 General Assembly overturned the rulings of the lower court and found Briggs guilty and removed him from ministry. His creedal revisions were also defeated (Weston 1997:8).

Weston (1997:8) points out that as part of the reunion of Old School and New School in 1870, Union Seminary agreed the General Assembly would have veto power over the appointment of professors. When the 1891 General Assembly vetoed Briggs' appointment, Union contended that the veto power was only for new appointments, not the transfer of existing faculty (:8-9). After the 1893 ruling, Union Seminary was threatened with expulsion from the Presbyterian Church unless Briggs was removed. Union refused and retained Briggs. Union finally became independent from the General Assembly control in 1904. Briggs resigned from Presbyterian ministry in 1898 rather than be removed (Rogers 1995:96-97, Balmer & Fitzmier 1994:57).

Conservatives also drummed out two other ministers besides Briggs, H R Smith and A C McGiffert, for denying biblical inerrancy and heresy (Balmer & Fitzmier 1994:86-87, see Weston 1997:10 for full discussion).

Weston (1997:104) argues that both Briggs and later, Machen, erred in viewing the conflict in the church as being between two parties, the liberals (modernists) and the conservatives (fundamentalists), rather than a competition between three groups, with the loyalist majority in the middle. Weston (:105) believes that Briggs, who was seen as a conservative, thought he represented the majority in the church. He should have followed a more accommodating policy to include the loyalists who, in the end, voted him out. Weston (2003:18) later reasons that Briggs' view of the church was too inclusive and it would have dissolved the Presbyterian Church.

Balmer & Fitzmier (1994:58) assert that the doctrinal skirmishes between liberals at Union Seminary and conservatives at Princeton Seminary prefigured the fundamentalist-modernist controversy of the 1920s. Weston (1997:xiii) also contends that the Briggs case in the 1890s and the Machen case in the 1920s and 1930s are connected and should not be separated as many other Presbyterian historians have done. Certainly, the 1903 revision of the Westminster Confession, again a softening on the doctrine of predestination, played a major role in what would occur in the 1920s.

## **2.9 The Revision of the Westminster Confession of Faith**

In the 1890s, moderate Presbyterians in the PCUSA attempted to revise the Westminster Confession of Faith. An attempt in 1892 failed (Smylie 1996:99). Proposed changes in 1899 failed in 1900. The 1900 General Assembly appointed a Committee of Fifteen to recommend revisions to the Confession of Faith and, in 1903, the presbyteries approved revisions to the Westminster Confession (Balmer & Fitzmier 1994:87) including the Declaratory Statement, which the conservatives had a grievance over for decades (Weston 1997:13-14). Opposition to the revision came from Warfield, the leading conservative in the denomination (Rian 1940:18 in Weston 1997:12).

Weston (1997:14) contends that the difference between the failed revision in the 1890s and success in the 1900s was, the liberals argued to the loyalists that revision was needed to preserve what was distinctly Presbyterian, and it was not about church union and ecumenical cooperation, as was argued earlier. The revision opened the way for the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, with Arminian views of free will (:12), formed in 1810 by revivalist ministers who held looser understandings of confessional standards, to unite with the PCUSA in 1906 (Balmer & Fitzmier 1994:61).

The mostly Northern PCUSA churches and the Southern Cumberland churches united after nearly 100 years of separation over polity and doctrine. However, the Fundamentalists at the 1910 and 1916 General Assemblies reacted to the liberal

theological tendencies of ministerial candidates (Longfield 2000:37) and set an extra-confessional doctrinal test (Rogers 1995:30). Thus, conservatives reacted to the broadening of the church by narrowing the doctrine; asserting the “five points” which every ministerial candidate had to subscribe to. Subscription made its way into the PCUSA.

## **2.10 The “Five Points or Fundamentals” of 1910**

The 1910 General Assembly of the PCUSA adopted a five-point declaration of “essential and necessary doctrines” that all candidates for ordination had to affirm. They were: 1) The inerrancy of Scripture; 2) The virgin birth of Christ; 3) Christ’s substitutionary atonement; 4) Christ’s bodily resurrection; 5) The authenticity of biblical miracles (Longfield 2000:37) or Christ’s miracles (Weston 1997:18). These essentials grew out of the 1895 Niagara Bible Conference, where fundamentalists insisted on premillennialism rather than the authenticity of miracles (Balmer & Fitzmier 1994:87). The inerrancy of Scripture, buttressed by Scottish Common Sense assumptions, was the cornerstone of the Old School and championed by Princeton Seminary. The “five points” were reaffirmed by the 1916 and 1923 General Assemblies. By the 1920s, they were known as the “five fundamentals” (Rogers 1995:30).

Liberals fought the “five points,” arguing that it was unconstitutional for the General Assembly to proclaim essential doctrine without the concurrence of the presbyteries (Weston 1997:19). This writer believes it heralds back to the Old Lights/Old School and New Lights/New School differences in the 1700s. One group emphasised the power and the authority of the General Assembly, the other the power and authority of the presbyteries, as prescribed by the *Adopting Act of 1729*.

## **2.11 The Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy in the 1920s**

Several major figures, documents, General Assembly rulings, and events in the PCUSA were instrumental when the conflict between conservatives/fundamentalists

and liberals/modernists played out in what is known as the fundamentalist-modernist controversy in the 1920s. This writer decided against discussing each major event separately, since they are inextricably interwoven in the same time period.

Dr. H E Fosdick was a liberal Baptist, a graduate from Union Seminary (Balmer & Fitzmier 1994:87), professor at Union Seminary, and Associate Pastor at First Presbyterian Church, New York (First), which was highly unusual, but allowed by the Presbytery of New York (Weston 1997:21). On 21 May 1922, Fosdick preached a sermon entitled, *Shall the Fundamentalists Win?* Fosdick challenged conservatives to tolerate liberals (Longfield 2000:38) and expressed doubts about the virgin birth, inerrancy of Scripture, and the second coming of Christ (Balmer & Fitzmier 1994:88). The sermon was reprinted and circulated without his permission, and provoked the conservatives to action. Rev. C A Macartney, from Philadelphia, shot back with a sermon, *Shall Unbelief Win?* (Weston 1997:21-22).

Macartney and the Presbytery of Philadelphia sent an overture to the 1923 General Assembly to direct the Presbytery of New York to take action requiring the teaching and preaching of First to conform to the doctrine taught in the Westminster Confession of Faith (Longfield 2000:38). The Committee on Bills and Overtures recommended no action pending the results of an investigation of the New York Presbytery regarding Fosdick (:40). However, the conservatives won the vote on the floor and the General Assembly instructed First to bring its preaching into conformity with the Westminster Confession. Eighty five ministers filed a protest (Weston 1997:22). It also responded by reaffirming the “five fundamentals” of 1910 (Longfield 2000:40). The vote was close; 439-359 (Balmer & Fitzmier 1994:88). Weston (1997:22) notes that it did not become part of the Constitution, since it was only a declaration by the General Assembly.

Longfield (2000:35, 38) contends that the issue was ecclesiology; how to preserve the influence of traditional Christianity on and in culture. Macartney believed that part of the moral decline and declining influence of Christianity was attributable to the rise of theological liberalism. W C Bryan believed the theory of biological evolution undercut biblical authority and destroyed the foundation of Christian

civilisation. The struggle against modernism was a struggle for the survival of Christian America (:38-39).

Dr. J G Machen, a conservative Professor of New Testament at Princeton Seminary, published *Christianity and Liberalism* in 1923, concluding that liberalism was an entirely different faith from Christianity; a non-Christian religion that was attempting to take over Christian churches (Weston 2003:22). He believed that reconciliation of these two radically different religions was impossible, and if the liberals refused to withdraw, then the conservatives would withdraw (Balmer & Fitzmier 1994:88). From 1923, Machen began to think seriously about division and schism (Weston 2003:22).

In January 1924, a group of 150 Presbyterian ministers signed the *Auburn Affirmation*, originating from Auburn Seminary, contending that the “five fundamentals” were theories that went beyond facts to which Scripture and the Westminster Confession committed them (Rogers 1995:30). They again questioned the constitutionality of the declaration by the General Assembly. A part of the document was a protest against the treatment of Fosdick (Weston 1997:23). Dr. W S Coffin from Union Seminary was one of the principal authors (:25). The signatories were:

... united in believing that these are not the only theories allowed by the Scriptures and our standards as explanations of these acts and doctrines of our religion, and all who hold to these acts and doctrines, whatever theories they may employ to explain them, are worthy of all confidence and fellowship (:24).

Thus, the document ratified the five-point declaration of 1910, but allowed that others might have other equally valid formulae. The document urged tolerance for those who affirmed alternative explanations of Christian doctrines. Weston (1997:24) contends that the real argument was not about facts, doctrine or theories, but about the Constitution of the PCUSA. The affirmation states that:

... the constitution of our church provides that its doctrine shall be declared only by concurrent action of the General Assembly and the presbyteries . . . . From this provision of our constitution, it is evident that neither in one General Assembly nor in many, without concurrent action of the presbyteries, is there authority to declare what the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America believes and teaches (:24-25).

The affirmationists argued that Presbyterians could choose from many theories until the General Assembly judged those theories in a constitutional manner. Weston (1997:25) is correct in seeing the liberals' appeal to unity and constitutional liberty as a shrewd move, by convincing the loyalists that the conservatives threatened the loyalists' constitutional position. The liberals formed an alliance with loyalists which removed the threat to their own position.

Weston's argument seems to be proven by the broad appeal of the *Auburn Affirmation*. In May 1924, they had 1,274 signatures (Balmer & Fitzmier 1994:88) out of nearly 10,000 ministers (Weston 1997:25). Most liberals signed the document, and besides the loyalists, some conservatives signed it as well (ibid).

Weston (1997:23) points out that the document was misunderstood by some as an affirmation of liberal theology, but it was an affirmation of Presbyterian constitutional order. Unlike Briggs and Machen, the affirmationists were successful in receiving the allegiance of the loyalists through this document, because they understood the political structure of the denomination. Machen claimed the affirmationists were professing their unbelief and that the General Assembly, by not disciplining them, participated in the heresy.

Weston's keen insight is affirmed by the history of the use of polity: the liberals learned how to use polity to further their cause in the rest of the 1900s (cf. Rogers 1995). However, as the study will reveal, the conservatives in the 1980s-2000s also learned how to work with the loyalists and to use polity to advance their cause.

Additionally, the Presbytery of New York, in June 1923, aggravated the situation. It defied the 1923 General Assembly in licensing two Union Seminary students who refused to affirm the virgin birth of Christ (Longfield 2000:40), one of the "five points." In February 1924, it exonerated Fosdick of any wrongdoing and proposed no disciplinary action. Conservatives in the presbytery appealed the case to the General Assembly (:40-41).

Before the 1924 General Assembly, Machen led the majority of the Princeton faculty to oppose the candidacy of his colleague, Dr. C Erdman, as moderator. The

exclusivist Macartney won a narrow victory over the conservative inclusive Erdman, whom the liberals supported (Weston 1997:26). Bryan was appointed as Vice-moderator (Rogers 1995:31). Several events transpired.

Regarding Fosdick, conservatives again asked that he be removed. The 1924 General Assembly shifted the issue away from questions regarding theology to matters of polity. The report that was adopted focused on the unusual nature of Fosdick's relationship with First. It recommended that if Fosdick, a Baptist, desired to preach there for an extended time, he should enter into a regular relationship with the church and become subject to their jurisdiction, or resign. The General Assembly instructed the Presbytery of New York to invite Fosdick to Presbyterian ministry (Weston 1997:26-27). Fosdick, however, was suspicious and could not accept the offer (Longfield 2000:41). Rogers (1995:31) believes the implication was that Fosdick would be tried for heresy. Fosdick refused and resigned from First in October 1924.

The Presbytery of Philadelphia sent an overture requesting that the "five points" be elevated, but the GAPJC ruled that it was unconstitutional because it attempted to make a new test of ministerial subscription without the concurrence of the presbyteries (PCUSA Minutes 1924:198 in Weston 1997:27).

The *Auburn Affirmation* was brought to the General Assembly's attention through two overtures. Macartney appointed conservatives to the Bills and Overtures Committee which dealt with the overtures, but no action was taken (Weston 1997:26-27). Longfield (2000:41) speculates that perhaps the commissioners were wary of taking action against so many ministers who had signed the document. The conservatives failed to address the liberals' document when they had the majority. Rian (1940:55 in Weston 1997:27) agrees that the inaction of the conservatives is something they would rue. Quirk (1967:153 in *ibid*) calls the failure an "enigma." He believes the conservatives, who had got rid of Briggs, Smith, and McGiffert, were squeamish about disciplining more ministers.

Weston (1997:27) believes that conservatives lost the Fosdick case and "five points," and realised they would lose the Assembly if they pushed the attack on the affirmationists as well. In Weston's (:28) estimation, the conservatives should not



have tried to act through the General Assembly, but should have brought charges against the individual affirmationists in their presbyteries. That way, they might have won the battle against liberal theology. Rather, as we will see next, due to various events, three years later the conservatives would be no more.

At the 1925 General Assembly, Erdman was elected as Moderator. The licensing by the New York Presbytery was again before the General Assembly. The presbytery had asked the judicial commission of the Assembly to determine the presbytery's power in licensing candidates, while the conservatives' appeal regarding the licensing of the two candidates was heard. The judicial commission reported back and ruled that the General Assembly did have the power of review over the actions of the presbytery and that the two candidates should not have been licensed since they could not affirm their belief in the virgin birth of Christ (Longfield 2000:42).

Modernists took to the offensive. Erdman had earlier agreed to allow Coffin, from Union Seminary and New York Presbytery, to issue a formal protest on behalf of the Presbytery of New York. Coffin declared the action unconstitutional and announced that the presbytery would not abide by it unless the Constitution was amended by the General Assembly and presbyteries (Longfield 2000:42-43). With the threat of schism looming, Erdman surrendered the moderator's chair and proposed the formation of a *Special Theological Commission of Fifteen* to study the spiritual condition of the church. Both Bryan and Coffin seconded the proposal and it passed unanimously (:43). Alternative names that are used for the Commission are the *Special Commission of 1925* or *Swearingen Commission*.

Longfield (2000:43) believes the liberals, with their threat to leave the church, pushed the moderate conservatives to decide whether a united church or strict doctrinal orthodoxy was more important.

A turning point in the fundamentalist-modernist controversy came later in 1925 in a courtroom in Dayton, TN. Earlier in 1925, legislation had been introduced in Tennessee to prohibit the teaching of evolution in public schools. Bryan's lecture, *Is the Bible True?*, had been distributed to the legislature members, who approved the bill (Rogers 1995:31). The American Civil Liberties Union challenged the constitutionality of the law and asked a young biology teacher, Mr. J Scopes, to be

the defendant in the case. The World's Christian Fundamentals Association asked Bryan to assist in the prosecution (Rogers 1995:32).

Bryan floundered and revealed his scant knowledge of the subject. He confirmed the stereotype of fundamentalism as ignorant, narrow-minded, and reactionary (Longfield 2000:43). Bryan won the case and died four days later; Scopes was declared guilty and fined \$100. But the price the fundamentalists paid was high. Its militant defence of a literal interpretation of the Bible lost the battle for public approval. The press heaped scorn on Bryan, and fundamentalism which represented common sense was ridiculed (Rogers 1995:32). After the Scopes trial, the two groups were the centrists/loyalists and liberals. The fundamentalists, who could not tolerate a modernist worldview, withdrew.

Meanwhile, the *Special Commission of 1925* consisted overwhelmingly of moderates (Longfield 2000:43) or loyalists who were moderate to conservative theologically (Weston 1997:29, 73). The Commission had five committees. The Causes of Unrest Committee agreed that an issue was the authority of the General Assembly to issue doctrinal deliverances regarding the ordination of ministers (:79). The Constitutional Procedures Committee found that a change to the Constitution cannot be brought about without the consideration and action of the presbyteries (:80).

At the 1926 General Assembly, the *Special Commission of 1925* delivered their first report and gave priority to polity. The report was from a loyalist, denominationally-orientated position (Weston 1997:80). Longfield (in Rogers 1999:38) explains that the limits of doctrine had henceforth to be established “either *generally*, by Amendment to the Constitution, or *particularly* [original italics], by Presbyterial authority, subject to the constitutional right of appeal.” The report also repudiated Machen's contention that conservatism and liberalism were mutually exclusive religions (Weston 1997:29).

The *Special Commission of 1925* spoke up for toleration, asserting that “the Presbyterian system admits diversity of view where the core of truth is identical” (quoted in Balmer & Fitzmier 1994:89) and:

The principle of toleration when rightly conceived and frankly and fairly applied is as truly part of our constitution as are any of the doctrines stated in that instrument . . . . Toleration as a principle applicable within the Presbyterian Church refers to an attitude and a practice according to which the status of a minister or other ordained officer, is acknowledged and fellowship is extended to him, even though he may hold views that are individual on points not regarded as essential to the system of faith which the Church professes (quoted in Weston 1997:80).

Toleration would do more to settle the disputes than schism would. Weston (1997:81) claims that when the 1926 General Assembly embraced tolerance and constitutional understanding, the tide turned in favour of pluralism in the church. A big majority adopted the report and the *Special Commission of 1925* asked for an extension until 1927 (:29).

At the 1927 General Assembly, one of the *Special Commission of 1925*'s members, Dr. R Speer, was elected Moderator and the Commission delivered its final report. The report emphasised the necessity of strict constitutional order and, on that basis, rejected the "five points." The report was adopted unanimously without debate (Weston 1997:29). The report answered the question of whether the General Assembly had any authority to declare any article to be essential and necessary. It referenced the *Adopting Act of 1729*, which specified that a decision as to essential and necessary articles was to be in specific cases, and not a general authority. This authority also was exercised by the presbytery and (General) Synod, which acted as a presbytery (PCUSA Minutes 1927:78).

The *Special Commission of 1925* held that essential and necessary articles were in relation to a system of doctrine, not salvation (PCUSA Minutes 1927:79). And, there were several systems of doctrine contained in the Confession of Faith. "A doctrine may be entirely true and yet not be an 'essential and necessary article' in the system. The question is not as to its truth, primarily, but, rather, is it essential *to the system?*" [Original italics] (:80).

The report found that the General Assembly, as judicial court, can judge a candidate's doctrinal beliefs in a judicial action and find whether the candidate is competent for office. But, the General Assembly cannot decide that certain articles

are essential and necessary to the system of doctrine contained in the Scriptures (PCUSA Minutes 1927:81).

Thus, when a General Assembly acts as judicatory, its decision cannot be made to rest properly upon merely declaratory deliverance of a former Assembly. And,

It seems quite clear, furthermore, that, granting for the moment the authority of the General Assembly, acting in any capacity, to declare broadly that an article is essential and necessary, it would be required to quote the exact language of the article as it appears in the Confession of Faith. It could not paraphrase the language nor use other terms than those employed within the Constitution, much less could it erect into essential and necessary articles doctrines which are only derived as inferences from the statements of the Confession (PCUSA Minutes 1927:81).

To summarise, the *Special Commission of 1925* affirmed two key principles, heralding from the *Adopting Act of 1729*. First, the right of the ordaining body to determine the fitness of a candidate was paramount. Second, neither the General Assembly nor the ordaining body could erect essential and necessary articles which were paraphrases of the Confessions or Scripture. The *Special Commission of 1925* and 1927 General Assembly, through accepting the report, reversed the decisions of earlier General Assemblies, notably the 1910, 1916, and 1923's affirmation of the "five points" or "five fundamentals."

Conservative control over the church's doctrine was broken by decentralisation of theological decision-making to the presbyteries (Rogers 1995:33). "The stage was set for several decades of reducing most theological disputes in the church to matters of proper interpretation of polity" (:38). Weston (1997:30) asserts that the coalition of loyalists and conservatives, which ran the church since the Briggs trial, came undone.

The splintering occurred not over theological doctrine, but over church polity. The conservatives had adopted a policy of doctrinal purity that did not reflect that diversity that always existed within the Presbyterian Church. Perhaps more important, the conservative position was out of accord with the constitutional safeguards protecting that diversity . . . . The liberals had learned to respect the constitutional tradition . . . . When the conservatives took the extraordinary step of attacking and undermining constitutional tradition . . . they lost the competition for the hearts and minds of the centrists (ibid).

Weston (1988:189 in Rogers 1995:38) observes that the liberal inclusivists wrestled the control of the denomination away from the conservative exclusivists through being constitutional pluralists. This is the same argument he uses in his 1997 book, *Presbyterian Pluralism*.

The net result of the Report of the *Special Commission of 1925* and the 1927 General Assembly of the PCUSA was that the “five points or fundamentals” of 1910, reaffirmed in 1916 and 1923, were declared non-binding. The tone was set of acceptance of the liberals, while the conservatives’ hold over the church was broken through the denomination embracing polity.

Weston (1997:30) claims that, after 1927, the conflict shifted from a fight between conservatives and liberals to a conflict between the centre and the right, and Princeton Seminary, the stronghold of the conservatives, would become a pivotal area of focus for the loyalists.

The 1929 General Assembly ended the control of the fundamentalists through the approval of a reorganisation of the government of Princeton Seminary. Machen and others left to form the Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia (Rogers 1995:33, Longfield 2000:46), to perpetuate the old Princeton Theology (Weston 1997:38). In 1933, Machen led a group to start the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions (IBPFM) and became its president (:41). The 1934 Judicial Commission found that the IBPFM undermined the good order of the PCUSA, and the 1934 General Assembly requested all Presbyterian officers to resign (:42). Machen refused to resign as president. In 1934 and 1935, he was tried by the Presbytery of New Brunswick for disobeying the 1934 General Assembly (:43). He was found guilty and was suspended; he appealed to the 1936 General Assembly, but nearly 1,000 votes ruled against him (:44). The Assembly also upheld four censures of members of Machen’s IBPFM (Longfield 2000:47).

In 1935, the majority of the board of Westminster Theological Seminary, including Macartney, resigned, not wanting to endorse Machen and the faculty’s aggressive separatism (Rogers 1995:38). Soon after, Rev. C McIntire led a schism that split Westminster Theological Seminary and Machen’s church (Weston 1997:45). Machen focused on doctrine alone and disagreed with other fundamentalists such as Macartney and Bryan, who wanted to address social and political issues. The division in the fundamentalist ranks was showing (Longfield 2000:39).

Machen openly started to speak about schism and, in 1936, with his followers, he formed the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), renamed the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) in 1939. Machen died soon afterwards (Longfield 2000:47). Hirschman (1970 in Weston 1997:104) brilliantly summarises what not only occurred with Machen, but what in this writer's view continues to occur:

Conservatives tend to focus not on the institutional church but on distinctive doctrines, and their loyalty to doctrine sometimes leads them to exit one denomination in favor of a new, pure one.

Once Machen and others withdrew or were forced out, the Old School, with their strict confessional and governmental standards, was no longer a viable political force. Church polity was used against them because the New School's inclusivism became a tenet of Presbyterian government (Rogers 1995:35). Rogers (1995:34) believes Machen made a mistake by viewing the conflict as between fundamentalists and liberals. But the majority votes were with the conservative moderate middle, which the liberals learned to cooperate with. Weston (1997:64) argues that Machen's struggle was against pluralism. He could not tolerate the liberals or the loyalists, whom he saw as the real opponents (:105). He attacked the centre just as easily as the liberals:

The "heretics" . . . are, with their helpers, the indifferentists, in control of the . . . Presbyterian Church in the United States of America . . . (quoted in Weston 1997:108).

Interestingly, Weston (1997:107) notes that Machen was reluctant to bring charges against any specific ministers; he could not find any to charge. Despite all his talk of the liberal and modernist threat, he did not even insist that the signers of the *Auburn Affirmation*, which he viewed as a modernist document, be disciplined.

The New School divided into two groups (Rogers 1995:35). The liberal inclusivists who were moderate to liberal learned to use the polity to further their cause. They learned to institutionalise their concerns through church polity. The evangelical moderates made up the moderate middle and stayed in the church through the process of Presbyterian government, which for them ensured doctrinal orthodoxy and church unity (Rogers 1995:36). Weston (1997:112) agrees that liberals, since the Briggs trial, learned how to make alliances with the loyalists in defence of constitutional

order, the *Special Commission of 1925* recognised the authority of the church's Constitution.

The liberals in the next decades would run the PCUSA, and later the UPCUSA, through their knowledge and use of constitutional polity. In the 1980s, however, the conservatives caught up and have since dominated the gay and lesbian ordination and/or installation, and same-gender blessing and marriage debates through their use of the constitutional and judicial process. Thus, the period of the 1980s to 2009 has become a long, drawn-out struggle over who controls the polity. Since 1978, the conservatives have been able to convince the loyalists to support their point of view. But, as the rest of this study will reveal, the liberals have made up ground. Thus, there is again a battle for the vote of the loyalist majority in the centre (cf. Weston 1997:123-143).

## **2.12 Membership Loss**

The schisms in the 1830s and 1920s were not so much about the number of members who left at that point in time, which were few, but the end result within the Presbyterian Church, which has lingered on for centuries. The combined membership of the Presbyterian Church was 4,254,597 in 1965 (Rogers 1995:24). From 1966-1988, the Presbyterian Church lost 1.3 million or 30 percent of its members (Smylie 1996:140). From 1988-2007, the denomination lost another 700,000 members, ending with 2,209,546 members at the end of 2007 (PC(USA) OGA 2008).

Various reasons exist for this dramatic decline, including the placement of too much emphasis on social reform. However, the most obvious reasons are that the Presbyterian Church's membership grew older, thus losing members through death (Smylie 1996:140); falling birth rates; and children raised in an ecumenical age not staying in the church (:141). Coalter *et al* (1992) argue that the Presbyterian Church needs to recover a theological vision, and not just transform society, which has been much of its focus.



In the early 1970s, the Southern PCUS lost 260 congregations and 250,000 members in a split that formed the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) (Rogers 1995:24). The reasons for the split were to continue the theology and worldview of those who separated from the Northern Presbyterian Church in the 1930s. They were committed to doctrine like the inerrancy of Scripture, the theology of the Old School and Machen, and the worldview that saw separatism as a virtue (Nutt 1990:236-256 in Rogers 1995:25).

From 1979-1981, the Northern UPCUSA lost about 60 congregations which joined the EPC. Many reasons for this are cited, but Rogers (1995:25) is convinced that they were rooted in a different worldview with a different approach to interpreting Scripture and moral values, and valued separatism as purifying the church. In the 2000s, there has again been a constant flow of PC(USA) congregations leaving for the EPC, with an escalation after 2006. The main reasons are the gay and lesbian ordination debate, the interpretation of Scripture, and the Authoritative Interpretation issued by the 2006 General Assembly when it approved the 2005 *Peace, Unity, and Purity* Report (see Chapter 5.49.1).

### **2.13 The Interpretation of Scripture Policies**

At the 1978 General Assembly of the UPCUSA, the Committee on Pluralism reported on its two-year study (UPCUSA Minutes 1978:290-293). Rogers (1995:107) comments that “pluralism” was a euphemism for “conflict.” The Committee discovered the reason for the conflict and divisiveness:

... none is more pervasive or fundamental than the question of how the Scriptures are to be interpreted. In other words, the widely differing ways the Old and New Testaments are accepted, interpreted, and applied were repeatedly cited to us by lay people, clergy, and theologians as the most prevalent cause of conflict within our denomination today. We recognize that our denomination includes responsible people who hold differing views concerning the proper interpretation of Scripture. We are troubled that this has resulted in destructive conflict.

It is our opinion that until our church examines this problem, our denomination will continue to be impeded in its mission and ministry, or we will spiral into a destructive schism (UPCUSA Minutes 1978:293).

The Task Force asked the 1978 General Assembly to authorise the Advisory Council on Discipleship and Worship (ACDW) to do a study on the diverse ways of

interpreting Scripture (UPCUSA Minutes 1978:293). In 1981, nearly sixty congregations left the UPCUSA for the EPC, citing a difference in understanding of the authority and interpretation of the Bible as a central factor in their dissatisfaction (Rogers 1995:107).

The Task Force on Biblical Authority and Interpretation established by the 1978 General Assembly of the UPCUSA presented its report in 1982, showing that Presbyterians held at least three different understandings of Scripture. Model A: The Bible as a Book of Inerrant Facts. This is the Princeton model that prevailed from 1812 until 1927 with exponents Hodge, Warfield and Machen. Its philosophy was based on Scottish Common Sense and utilised the grammatical-historical approach (UPCUSA 1982:322-323). Model B: The Bible as Witness to Christ, the Word of God. The exponents were Barth and Brunner and drew on the philosophy of Kierkegaard. It uses a Christocentric approach (:323-324). Model C: The Divine Message in Human Forms and Thoughts. The exponent was Berkouwer and its philosophy was based on Augustine. It utilises a contextual approach (:324-325).

The Task Force presented “guidelines and recommendations for a positive and nonrestrictive use of Scripture in matters of controversy” (UPCUSA Minutes 1982:328). The Task Force admonished the General Assembly:

In fact, a more faithful and constant reading of Scripture might provoke more and not less controversy. Nor should this be something to be afraid of. Controversy is a part of life and growth; it may give us the experience of struggling together with Scripture in an authentic and helpful way (ibid).

Guideline 1 had six suggestions for interpretation, based on the UPCUSA *Book of Confessions*. A seventh summary guideline was added at the General Assembly:

1. Be guided by the basic rules for the interpretation of Scripture that are summarized from The Book of Confessions.
  - a) Recognize that Jesus Christ, the Redeemer, is the center of Scripture . . . . When interpreting Scripture, keeping Christ in the center aids in evaluating the significance of the problems and controversies that always persist in the vigorous, historical life of the church.
  - b) Let the focus be on the plain text of Scripture, to the grammatical and historical context, rather than to allegory or subjective fantasy.
  - c) Depend on the guidance of the Holy Spirit in interpreting and applying God’s message (UPCUSA 1982:328).
  - d) Be guided by the doctrinal consensus of the church, which is the rule of faith.
  - e) Let all interpretations be in accord with the rule of love, the two-fold commandment to love God and to love our neighbor.
  - f) Remember that interpretation of the Bible requires earnest study in order to establish the best text and to interpret the influence of the historical and cultural context in which the divine message has come.

g) Seek to interpret a particular passage of the Bible in light of all the Bible (:330).

Additionally, seven other guidelines for theological discussion and recommendations were also adopted. Guideline 8 ends with:

Use the established channels of communication and the process of voting to express conviction, either as part of the majority or as part of the minority. Be willing to accept decisions and welcome the continuing advocacy of minority views (UPCUSA Minutes 1982:330).

It is clear that we cannot escape the fact that, in the end, our theological differences regarding interpretation of Scripture are resolved through polity means. We try to solve our problems by voting. But, when you vote, there are winners and losers. Someone is right and someone else is wrong. How does the minority, who has been voted out for the past thirty years, advocate their view when the polity is set according to Robert's Rules of Order to recognise only the vote of the majority? Will majority vote through polity solve our theological differences and varied Scripture interpretations regarding same-gender relationships, or drive us further apart?

In 1983, the PCUS, anticipating the merger with the UPCUSA, presented its paper, *Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture*, at the re-united 1983 General Assembly of the PC(USA). It expanded the seven guidelines to nine, offered detailed citations of where they were found in the Confessions, and the manner in which they were to be applied (PC(USA) Minutes 1983:607-617). The General Assembly adopted them (:109). These "Guidelines concerning how the text is rightly used" are summarised here due to their length:

1. The purpose of Holy Scripture.
2. The precedence of Holy Scripture.
3. The centrality of Jesus Christ.
4. The interpretation of Scripture by Scripture.
5. The rule of love.
6. The rule of faith.
7. The fallibility of all interpretations.
8. The relation of Word and Spirit.
9. The use of all relevant guidelines (:611-617).

Rogers (1995:109) asserts that the guidelines reflect a centrist position that is rooted in the Reformed confessional standard and is also alert to the concerns of the modern world.

Guidelines 5 and 6 are extremely valuable and one has to take note of their sequence when used in the ordination and same-gender marriage debate. Regarding the “Rule of Love,” it states:

No interpretation of Scripture is correct which leads to or supports contempt for any individual or group of persons either within or outside the church. Such results from the interpretation of Scripture plainly indicate that the rule of love has not been honored (PC(USA) Minutes 1983:615).

Regarding the “Rule of Faith,” it states that all interpretations are to be tested against Scripture, the Confessions, and the Reformed tradition, and we should be open to judgment and correction of our interpretations. Regarding the “Fallibility of All Interpretations,” it recognises:

Where interpretations of Scripture are in tension with the rule of faith, those interpretations should be examined carefully and critically out of concern to maintain the continuity of the tradition. On the other hand, we must also reckon with the fact that past interpretations embodied in the rule of faith are also fallible and susceptible to revision on the basis of Scripture itself. Thus no doctrinal or ethical interpretation of Scripture, whether long established or new, is to be accepted as the final word, but is always subject to possible revision and correction as a result of further study of Scripture (PC(USA) Minutes 1983:616).

Unfortunately, as will be seen in the rest of this study, this guideline has not been consistently followed in the ordination and same-gender marriage debates. The 1978 and 1979 “definitive guidance” statements regarding gay and lesbian ordination was in effect for thirty years, until it was revoked by the 2008 General Assembly. Yet, no theological statement was issued regarding what our new understanding was. Rather, a new Authoritative Interpretation, a polity action, was used to replace the 1978 and 1979 polity, which was based on the interpretation of that period. Not once in thirty years has the PC(USA) adopted or approved any of the reports which have come before the General Assemblies to reinterpret our understanding of same-gender relationships in the light of Scripture, the sciences or Guideline 8 of 1983 - what the Holy Spirit reveals anew to us. It has merely become a matter of polity through changes in the *Book of Order* and Authoritative Interpretations issued by the General Assembly or its GAPJC.

Together, these two documents from 1982 and 1983 form the official and orthodox position of the PC(USA) on interpreting Scripture. Yet, despite their valuable guidance and the effort in producing them, they are neither utilised nor referenced in the ordination and same-gender marriage debate, since it is not a theological

discussion, but rather has become a matter of polity. The conservatives and liberals do not engage each other in theological discussion or even use Scripture or the various guiding principles in their overtures and arguments. The contest is about who proposes the right wording; who utilises polity the best, and convinces the loyalist commissioners at the General Assembly and at presbyteries to vote for their polity changes. Weston (1997:3) is right in his assertion that Presbyterian pluralism has led to competition for the vote of the loyalist or centrist middle.

## 2.14 Reunions and Schisms

In 1951, talks began between the PCUSA, formed in 1788, the United Presbyterian Church in North America (UPCNA), formed in 1858, and the PCUS, formed in 1861. The PCUS withdrew from the proposed merger. In May 1958, the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (UPCUSA) was formed (Balmer & Fitzmier 1994:102). The UPCUSA adopted the Westminster Confession and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms as doctrinal standards (Smylie 1996:124). The UPCUSA became known as the Northern church and the PCUS as the Southern church.

In 1967, the UPCUSA recast its confessional stance with the compilation of *The Book of Confessions*. This consisted of the newly formulated Confession of 1967 and eight other historical documents, namely, the Apostle's Creed, Nicene Creed, the Scots Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, Second Helvetic Confession, the Westminster Confession, the Shorter Catechism and the Theological Declaration of Barmen. The PCUS only had three Confessions: the Westminster Confession and both the Shorter and Larger Catechisms (Balmer & Fitzmier 1994:108).

The Confession of 1967 has continued to be a stumbling block for conservatives since it endorsed modern biblical scholarship, and reading the Bible historically and not literally, liberating it from the doctrine of inerrancy (Hart & Muether 2006a:1). Additionally, the ordination vows were also rewritten and no longer required receiving the confessions standards as "containing the system of doctrine found in Scripture." Hart & Muether (:2), who are hardly objective since they belong to the

Orthodox Presbyterian Church created by Machen and follow his train of thought, claim the UPCUSA abandoned its confessional identity and was no longer a confessional church.

In 1981, after Rev. Kaseman was ordained in the United Church of Christ (UCC) (see Chapter 3.18) about a dozen congregations left both the PCUS and UPCUSA (Hart & Muether 2006b:1) and formed the EPC due to their concern over liberalism in their denominations. In 2008, the EPC had 85,000 members (<http://www.epc.org>) and many thousands of PC(USA) members continue to join them.

Since 1977, the UPCUSA and PCUS had been meeting in the same city at the same time. In 1981 and 1982, the presbyteries of each denomination discussed merger plans (Balmer & Fitzmier 1994:108). On 10 June 1983, after meeting separately for the last time, the UPCUSA and the PCUS merged to form the PC(USA). After being apart since 1861, a three million member denomination was formed. The Larger Catechism was added to *The Book of Confessions* and a Committee was formed to write a brief statement of Reformed faith for the new denomination (:109). A Brief Statement of Faith was written in 1983 and added to the Confessions.

Rogers (1995:48) believes that the PC(USA), since reunion in 1983, has attempted to restructure without dealing with the different worldviews of the fundamentalists, who focus on the higher governing bodies, and the liberals, who focus on the local congregations. Thus, the General Assemblies have become negotiating sessions where special interest groups come to lobby for their cause and to have regulations made to conform to a specific social policy (:49).

## **2.15 Latitude in Matters of Doctrine**

Since the earliest times, American Presbyterians have disagreed over the requirements of ministerial ordination. The *Adopting Act of 1729* applied the principle of scrupling to matters of “doctrine, worship or government.” Coalter *et al* (2005:6) point out that the church has allowed latitude in all three. In 1801, with the *Plan of Union* with the Congregationalists, Presbyterians were allowed to adopt

practices of Congregationalist polity. This provision, unfortunately, led to the Old School and New School schism in 1837. At the 1869 reunion, they allowed for flexibility in faith and order.

Even the ordination vows have changed in recent decades. The sole subscription to the Westminster standards before 1967 in the UPCUSA disappeared and was replaced, after the adoption of *The Book of Confessions* in 1967, with new questions (see the Rankin decision in Chapter 3.19). More importantly, the GAPJC ruling in the Rankin case found:

Now the Constitution places the primary focus of the candidate's examination not on his or her conformity with theological prescriptions but rather on the candidate's willingness and commitment to be instructed by the Confessions of our Church and continually guided by them in leading the people of God (UPCUSA Minutes 1982:115).

The *Plan for Reunion*, leading to the formation of the PC(USA) in 1983, posed two questions in G-14.0405c-d (currently W-4.4003c-d):

Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the Confessions of our Church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will you be instructed and led by those Confessions as you lead the people of God?  
[Will you fulfill your office] in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture, and be continually guided by our Confessions? (quoted in Coalter, Wheeler & Wilkinson 2005:6-7 footnote 9).

These vows in the *Book of Order*, with only capitalisation and numbering changes, have remained the same. Note the change which occurred: from subscription to one Confession; the Westminster Standard, to being instructed, led, and guided by all the Confessions. Additionally, the first level of obedience is to Jesus Christ, then to Scripture, and lastly, to the Confessions.

## 2.16 Summary

Several historical and polity factors have contributed to the predicament and crisis in which the PC(USA) finds itself in 2009. Rogers (1995:23), Burgess (1999:269), Beuttler (1999:247), and others attribute the present conflict in the PC(USA) to the fundamentalist-modernist controversy in the 1920s. The PC(USA) is still dealing with the consequences of the 1927 General Assembly of the PCUSA, when it accepted the report of the *Special Commission of 1925*, recommending that the



church not discuss theology, but use polity to resolve struggles over diversity and unity. Furthermore, the Presbyterian Church in the 1920s repeated what it had done in the 1830s by resolving the issue on polity grounds and not theological grounds.

Beuttler (1999:248) contends that the resolution in 1927 did not allow open theological debate; instead, it encouraged political manoeuvres. Thus, what is essential and non-essential was never defined. The GAPJC in the Maxwell ruling, regarding Kenyon (see Chapter 3.4), raised women's ordination to an essential belief, and precluded any debate, based on the 1927 decision. Beuttler believes this led to the schisms in the 1970s and 1980s.

Beuttler (1999:247) attributes the resulting schism in the 1930s, the biggest in the denomination's history, to the General Assembly not defining the "essentials of the Reformed faith," but instead bypassing the debate and leaving the theological definitions to local bodies. However, Rogers (1995:38-39) reminds us of the extent of the schism: only one percent of members left with Machen and others to form the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) in 1936, which became the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) in 1939.