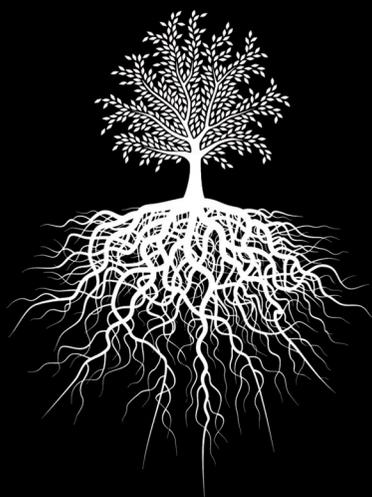


FOR A
CONTINUING
CHURCH



THE ROOTS OF THE
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
IN AMERICA

SEAN MICHAEL
LUCAS

“This is a story that had to be told, and Sean Lucas has told it with the skill and care of a historian and the warmth and concern of a pastor. Dr. Lucas is thorough, honest, fair, and accurate in unfolding the history of a complex movement that includes mixed motives, different hopes, complicated relationships, and inner controversies. In spite of the failures of the Presbyterian Church in America (‘the purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error’), its history is a good story, indeed a wonderful story, of God’s grace and blessing on a group of southern Presbyterians who were committed, despite the cost, to establishing and maintaining ‘a continuing church,’ true to the Bible, faithful to Reformed theology, and obedient to the Great Commission. If you want to understand the Presbyterian Church in America, you must read this book.”

—**David B. Calhoun**, Professor Emeritus of Church History,
Covenant Theological Seminary

“This important work by my friend Sean Lucas is much needed, well researched, forthright, and comprehensive. It will be a tremendous resource for present and future leaders in the PCA in general and Covenant Seminary students in particular. Lucas gets the story straight so that we can see more clearly both the strengths and the blind spots of our past. He does this with a hope-filled desire for faithfulness in today’s church as another new generation takes its place of leadership and joins God’s mission in and through the PCA and beyond.”

—**Mark L. Dalbey**, President and Associate Professor of Applied
Theology, Covenant Theological Seminary

“Don’t let the title fool you. This is about far more than the PCA. This book is nothing less than a history of Presbyterianism in the twentieth century—with all its theological wrangling, all its political maneuvering, all its failings, and all its faithfulness. This is certainly a story worth telling, and Sean tells it very well.”

—**Kevin DeYoung**, Senior Pastor, University Reformed Church,
East Lansing, Michigan

“Sean Lucas has given us an account of events leading up to founding of the Presbyterian Church in America that not only is informative from a historical perspective but could be valuable in helping to assess events taking place today. Some of the issues and concerns facing the church today are similar to, if not the same as, those that fed into the forming of the PCA. I believe this book not only will have an appeal to those involved in this history, but could be a resource for those who have come along at a later time to better understand where and why we are today.”

—**Charles H. Dunahoo**, Chairman of the Board, Westminster Theological Seminary; Coordinator of Christian Education & Publications, PCA (retired)

“Take it from this Baptist. I don’t care if you’re not a conservative Presbyterian; you still need to read *For a Continuing Church*. It tells an important, yet often-neglected story in the history of American evangelicalism, combining original research and outstanding engagement with current scholarship. Writing with the empathy of an insider, but the historical honesty of a critical scholar, Sean Lucas has also told this story in a masterfully crafted narrative. The book makes a lasting contribution to our understanding of the American evangelical landscape, highlighting the complexity of denominational movements and institutions. It should be read widely, not only by historians, but by anyone else who wants to think carefully about the intersection of faith and culture.”

—**Matthew J. Hall**, Vice President of Academic Services, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“With *For a Continuing Church*, Sean Michael Lucas has remedied the neglect that southern Presbyterians have generally suffered at the hands of church historians. His story of conservatives in the Presbyterian Church in the United States follows carefully the Old School tradition as it developed and adapted to twentieth-century life, and then informed the founding of the Presbyterian Church in America. If history teaches lessons, Lucas’s book has at least a semester’s worth for

both those who belong to the PCA and others who desire to promote and maintain the witness of Reformed Protestantism.”

—**D. G. Hart**, author of *Calvinism: A History*

“I’ve always thought of my friend and former colleague Sean Lucas as a walking encyclopedia. Every page of this volume proves me right. Meticulously researched, this history of the founding of the Presbyterian Church in America will instantly become the definitive account of a significant movement in the history of American Presbyterianism. The detail is comprehensive, the writing is wonderfully engaging (as though the drama were being played out before our very eyes), and the sins of the past are neither downplayed nor exaggerated. As a church historian and pastor in the Presbyterian Church in America, I’ve waited a long time for this history. I was not disappointed. There were surprises, there were aspects of the story that filled in gaps in my own understanding, and there was a sense of encouragement as I turned the last page. It does seem that we can count ourselves as one example of an evangelical Presbyterian church that God has enabled to remain true to the Scriptures, the Westminster Standards, and the robust Reformed faith. Praise God from whom all blessings flow!”

—**Michael W. Honeycutt**, Senior Pastor, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Rock Hill, South Carolina

“This book offers the first comprehensive story of southern conservative Presbyterianism—a most important and too-often-neglected part of the larger story of American Christianity. It is full of both inspiring moments and cautionary tales. It is as church history should be: a faithful and engaging retelling of the church’s past in the service of her present and future calling.”

—**Stephen J. Nichols**, President, Reformation Bible College; Chief Academic Officer, Ligonier Ministries

“As God did a glorious work in the lives of his imperfect but beloved covenant people, he would at times tell them to ‘pile up some stones’ in order to remember what he had done and to teach the ‘coming generations.’ Sean Lucas has ‘piled up some stones’ to prod our remembrance

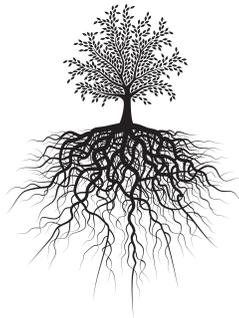
of the gracious work of God's providence in establishing the Presbyterian Church in America. And the 'coming generations' are therefore sure to be both encouraged and equipped for a future that by God's grace will be marked with an imperfect yet loving obedience."

—**Harry L. Reeder III**, Senior Pastor, Briarwood Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama

"With first-rate scholarship, engaging style, and a pastor's insights, Sean Lucas provides the most perceptive history of the Presbyterian Church in America thus far. His proof that our forefathers intended for the PCA to be a new mainline denomination confirms that the growth pains so far have been worth it and inspires us to renew their vision to be a servant-leader denomination. According to Lucas's research, our mandate as a denomination is to make sure that our service to the gospel is not 'done in a corner.' My friend has once again been used of the Lord to refresh my commitment to the Scriptures, the Reformed faith, and the Great Commission!"

—**George Robertson**, Senior Pastor, The First Presbyterian Church, Augusta, Georgia

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SEAN MICHAEL
LUCAS

RR
P U B L I S H I N G
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

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For
Sam, Liz, Drew, and Ben

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Foreword

In just over forty years, the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) has grown to be the largest conservative Presbyterian denomination in the English-speaking world. From a small evangelical splinter group that left the declining Presbyterian Church in the United States, the PCA has survived and continued and expanded and matured despite the early predictions of both enemies and friends. And while it is still relatively small in comparison to a body such as the Southern Baptist Convention, the PCA exercises a theological influence in the evangelical world, and a cultural influence in the United States, disproportionate to its size.

From the beginning, the PCA was committed to the inerrancy of Scripture, the Reformed theology of the Westminster Standards, and the fulfillment of the Great Commission. The founders of the PCA envisioned a conservative mainline Presbyterian denomination characterized by biblical authority, doctrinal orthodoxy, experiential piety, and missionary zeal. Unwittingly, they forged a body that has played a significant role in the resurgence of Calvinism at the end of the twentieth century and in the beginning of the twenty-first.

Yet from the outset of its history, the PCA has struggled with its identity. Early on, factions self-identified as “thoroughly Reformed” or “broadly evangelical,” with one group claiming that the PCA had been started as a revival of Old School Presbyterianism (and was thus opposed to evangelistic and missionary cooperation with non-Calvinist evangelicals) and the other viewing the PCA as a Calvinistic denominational entry in the late-twentieth-century neoevangelical network (and was thus favorable toward missionary cooperation with non-Calvinist evangelicals). These perspectives were not entirely mutually exclusive, nor did these groups represent the only

constituencies in the PCA, but their juxtaposition characterized many of the early debates in the young PCA.

This is, of course, not the only taxonomy that has been used to describe the PCA. The PCA has, for instance, also been depicted as tripartite, with doctrinalists, pietists, and transformationalists making up its ministry, along with competing visions of what it is and should be. And there have been specific issues that animated discussion at the General Assembly and highlighted very different ways in which people conceived of the PCA (and indeed of the mission of the church): the role of spiritual gifts (continuationism and cessationism); Christian reconstructionism (theonomy); marriage, divorce, and remarriage (especially the matter of biblical grounds for divorce and remarriage); Freemasonry; creation and the days of Genesis; paedocommunion; the validity of Roman Catholic baptism; confessional subscription; women in the military; the Federal Vision controversy; the “Insider Movement” (dealing with contextualization issues, especially in relation to Muslim mission work and Bible translation); and more. The joining and receiving of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod, into the PCA in 1982 added another layer of complexity to the PCA identity issue, and another historical experience.

Meanwhile, the PCA in its young history has lived through a cultural megashift. Today’s judicial rulings about the definition of marriage were inconceivable in the world in which the PCA was born. During the early years of the PCA, which coincided with an era of unprecedented evangelical political influence, the “Moral Majority” aspired to cultural dominance. Bible-believing Christians today hold no such illusions, and frankly wonder how long they will even be allowed a place at the table.

There have been happy societal changes as well, though. Perhaps the most significant is in race relations. Though 2014 saw new disappointments and tensions in America, we are a world away from the era in which the conservative movement began in the old southern Presbyterian church. In those days, Jim Crow and segregation still haunted us; then came the civil-rights movement. The PCA’s founders explicitly and officially stated their desires for a denomination that would include all races, but the PCA began overwhelmingly

white. The children and grandchildren of the PCA founders, however, are part of a denomination that has witnessed and participated in a Reformed awakening in the African-American community, and that is planting multiethnic congregations, establishing campus ministries at historically black colleges and universities (which have a very substantial Asian membership), is deliberately reaching out into the Hispanic communities, and is intentionally and happily committed to a PCA that is increasingly multiethnic.

These cultural and societal changes have had a massive effect on the PCA, and are especially reflected in very different generational perspectives on how the church ought (or ought not) to address social issues. Those differing viewpoints and approaches have brought their own challenges to the formation of a coherent, compelling denominational identity.

Representing one's own denominational history, at point-blank range, with all these factors and perspectives, is a challenge, to say the least. Add to that the fact that Presbyterian history in general, and the history of conservative Presbyterianism in the twentieth century in particular, is not a well-known subject, even by Presbyterian ministers, and you have a real interpretive conundrum.

This is but one reason that I am so grateful for and excited about Sean Michael Lucas's new history of the PCA, *For a Continuing Church*. Dr. Lucas is a recognized church historian, an expert in American Presbyterianism, a respected pastor, a widely regarded churchman, a veteran theological administrator, and a master teacher. He brings a rich experience and profound historical insight to the task. This book itself, well researched, evenhanded, generous-spirited, offers a pathway to denominational self-understanding and on into the future of a Presbyterianism that is true to the Bible, in accordance with the Reformed faith, and obedient to the Great Commission.

Ligon Duncan, Ph.D.

Chancellor, Reformed Theological Seminary

John E. Richards Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology
Past Moderator, General Assembly, Presbyterian Church in America

Acknowledgments

This book would not be possible at all without the assistance of many folks through many years. First, I would like to acknowledge the session of First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Mississippi, who graciously opened their session records to me during a visit in 2002. J. Ligon Duncan III, then senior minister at the church, and his staff, especially Mary Ball, made me feel welcomed. Later, the session asked me to write the church's 175th anniversary history that was eventually published in 2013 as *Blessed Zion: First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Mississippi, 1837–2012*. The opportunity to think through the developments that led to the beginning of the PCA from the perspective of a historic, flagship congregation was extremely valuable.

Also, Wayne Sparkman, director of the PCA Historical Center, assisted me throughout my research, hosting me on several occasions as I did initial research in St. Louis and opening his doors to me after I arrived at Covenant Seminary to work and teach. Since I left St. Louis, Wayne has continued to be on the lookout for documents that would help; he has been a partner in this project. I am especially grateful to Jim Pakala and the staff at the J. Oliver Buswell Library at Covenant Seminary, who ran down scores and scores of books and articles for me through interlibrary loan. Several other repositories opened their collections to me: the James P. Boyce Library at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky; the Billy Graham Center Archives at Wheaton College; the Presbyterian Historical Society, at both the Montreat, North Carolina, and Philadelphia offices (after the Montreat office closed, all references to *PHS* in the notes are to the Philadelphia office); the Archives at Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia; the Morton Library at Union Presbyterian Seminary, Richmond, Virginia; and the library at Reformed Theological Seminary,

Jackson, Mississippi. I am thankful as well to David Peterson, who shared his research on Judge Samuel Wilson with me, and to Bill Smith, John Muether, and Brister Ware, who all supplied hard-to-find documents.

Projects such as this cannot happen without money, time, and feedback. I am pleased to acknowledge the 2004–5 research fellowship I received from the Presbyterian Historical Society to do research in Montreal. While at Covenant Theological Seminary, I enjoyed the support and confidence of many friends, particularly Bryan Chapell, Donald Guthrie, Mark Dalbey, David Calhoun, and Jimmy Agan. I am grateful to my faculty colleagues to whom I presented a section of chapter 5 at a colloquium for their interest and dialogue. In addition, I thank the seminary's president, Bryan Chapell, and the board of trustees for granting me a sabbatical for the spring 2009 term and for funding research trips to Richmond, Virginia, and Philadelphia. Since I have served in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, the session and staff at First Presbyterian Church have consistently supported my calling to write; the writing sabbatical that I enjoyed in 2013, as well as the regular writing days that I had, were a gift not only to me but to the church at large and significantly aided the completion of this manuscript.

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My family's support has been invaluable. My wife, Sara, came along with me on this journey into Presbyterianism. Steve and Susan

Lucas, my parents, encouraged me by reminding me often about the importance of this book. Ron and Phyllis Young, my parents-in-law, continue to maintain a close relationship with us and remind us that connectedness is important, whether within a church or a family. I hope they enjoy this story of a different kind of fundamentalism. This book began right after my third child was born; our oldest was not yet five. It has grown up with my four children; there has never been a day that they did not know about “the big book.” It is fitting that this volume be dedicated to them. My prayer is that they will always love Jesus and this wonderful, flawed, beautiful Presbyterian church.

Abbreviations

BGC	Billy Graham Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois
CLC	Covenant Life Curriculum
<i>CO</i>	<i>Christian Observer</i>
COCU	Consultation on Church Union
ECOE	Executive Commission on Overseas Evangelism
<i>MGAPCUS</i>	<i>Minutes, General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States</i>
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NPRF	National Presbyterian and Reformed Fellowship
OPC	Orthodox Presbyterian Church
PCA	Presbyterian Church in America
PCAHC	Presbyterian Church in America Historical Center, St. Louis, Missouri
PCU	Presbyterian Churchmen United
PCUS	Presbyterian Church in the United States
PCUSA	Presbyterian Church in the United States of America
PC(USA)	Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
PEF	Presbyterian Evangelistic Fellowship
PHS	Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia
<i>PJ</i>	<i>Presbyterian Journal</i>
<i>PO</i>	<i>Presbyterian Outlook</i>
RPCES	Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod

<i>SPJ</i>	<i>Southern Presbyterian Journal</i>
UPCUSA	United Presbyterian Church in the USA
UPS	William Morton Library, Union Presbyterian Seminary, Richmond, Virginia
WCF	Westminster Confession of Faith

Introduction: The Roots of the Presbyterian Church in America

The creation of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) on 4 December 1973 was an attempt to preserve a “continuing” Presbyterian church. Concerned by the apparent leftward drift of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS), colloquially known as the “southern Presbyterian Church,” those who led in forming the PCA were concerned with doctrinal and ecclesiastical issues; they believed that the agencies and boards of the denomination, along with many of its ministers, had become apostate and that the only way in which the mission and tradition of the PCUS could be preserved was through a separation. When the separation happened, it brought to an end over forty years of conflict with the PCUS.

In forming this continuing Presbyterian church, the founding generation believed that it was preserving what was best from the PCUS. In particular, the leaders were trying to form a conservative “mainline” Presbyterian body, one that was committed to biblical inspiration and inerrancy, warm and winsome Calvinism, and aggressive local and global evangelization. The desire was that the new church would marry these emphases with a sense of cultural responsibility for American civilization. Like liberal mainstream Protestants, the southern Presbyterian conservatives who formed the PCA believed that the church had a responsibility to culture. These conservatives differed in how to relate to culture: while liberal Protestants issued prophetic statements or utilized educational processes to impact culture,

conservatives tended to emphasize evangelism as the means of bringing cultural change. And yet these conservatives who formed the PCA were profoundly interested in preserving American civilization through their efforts.¹

And so the PCA was formed to be a conservative mainline Presbyterian body. This claim undoubtedly surprises because the PCA could be read in the light of a number of other ecclesiastical divisions that littered the twentieth century. When the PCUS conflicts began in earnest in the late 1920s, the northern Baptist and Presbyterian churches were already convulsed by the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, which led to the creation of new Baptist and Presbyterian connections, the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches (1932), the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (1936), the Bible Presbyterian Synod (1937), and the Conservative Baptist Association (1947). As the strife in the PCUS came to a head in the 1960s and 1970s, there were similar troubles in denominations as diverse as the Southern Baptist Convention, the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, and the Episcopal Church. Hence, it is fair to say that the southern Presbyterian conservatives who formed the PCA bore some similarities with other fundamentalists: emphasis on key doctrinal issues, such as biblical inerrancy and the exclusive nature of salvation in Jesus Christ, a demand for evangelism as the primary mission of the church, and a willingness to separate from those deemed apostate. By separating from the PCUS to form a new denomination, southern Presbyterian conservatives followed a well-worn path.²

Yet while they followed a path that others traveled, it is notable that these church leaders actually formed a new denomination rather than joining with either the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) or the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod (RPCES),

1. W. Jack Williamson, "To the Glory of God," *PJ* (26 December 1973): 19.

2. All issues raised in "A Message," *PJ* (26 December 1973): 7–8; Bryan V. Hillis, *Can Two Walk Together unless They Be Agreed? American Religious Schisms in the 1970s* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson, 1991). For the history of that first generation of northern Presbyterian and Baptist fundamentalists, see George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism, 1875–1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); D. G. Hart and John Muether, *Fighting the Good Fight: A Brief History of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia: Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1995).

a successor denomination to the Bible Presbyterian Church. Such a determination reflects the different aims and goals that southern Presbyterian conservatives had for their new body—aims and goals that were distinctly mainline in orientation. To be sure, there were connections between followers of northern Presbyterian fundamentalist J. Gresham Machen and their southern counterparts that contributed to the development of conservative dissent within the PCUS. And Machen’s Westminster Theological Seminary did play a role in supplying conservative ministerial leadership to the PCUS. Several leaders of the “Conservative Coalition” trained at Westminster—either graduating from the theological school or transferring to a PCUS seminary for the last year of school to ease placement. Some conservatives actually pastored churches in the OPC before coming south to serve conservative PCUS congregations. Even more, many of the issues over which southern conservatives agitated were issues that caused northern Presbyterians to bolt from that denomination, specifically the inerrancy of Scripture and confessional subscription.³

Yet there were important differences. For example, while many in the Machen cohort that led the OPC in its early days sought to maintain a confessional Presbyterianism for its own sake, the majority of those who helped to develop the PCA were less interested in arguing over secondary theological issues that would distract from the larger goal of evangelizing and renewing American culture. In fact, it appeared that conservatives within the PCUS were influenced more strongly by the rising “New Evangelicalism” and its luminaries, particularly Billy Graham, than by leaders or emphases from the OPC. For example, one important link between the New Evangelicals and southern Presbyterians was L. Nelson Bell, Graham’s father-in-law and founder of both *Presbyterian Journal*, the magazine of southern

3. Rick L. Nutt, “The Tie That No Longer Binds: The Origins of the Presbyterian Church in America,” in *The Confessional Mosaic: Presbyterians and Twentieth-Century Theology*, ed. Milton J. Coalter, John M. Mulder, and Louis B. Weeks (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 236–56; R. Milton Winter, “Division and Reunion in the Presbyterian Church, U.S.: A Mississippi Retrospective,” *Journal of Presbyterian History* 78, 1 (2000): 76; William R. Glass, *Strangers in Zion: Fundamentalists in the South, 1900–1950* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2001); Vernon S. Broyles III, “Is the PCUS Problem ‘Confessional Fundamentalism’?,” *PO* (11 September 1972): 5.

Presbyterian conservatives, and *Christianity Today*, the magazine for New Evangelicals.⁴

Thus, rather than link arms with smaller, separatist northern Presbyterian bodies, the founders of the PCA forged a body that would emphasize conservative doctrine for the purpose of renewing American culture. But the PCA would be more than this. From the beginning, southern Presbyterian conservatives articulated right-wing social and political views that would shape the founding of the denomination and continue to characterize the vast majority of ministers and laypeople. In the post–World War II era, these conservatives articulated a religiously inspired version of conservative political ideology: anticommunism, anti-integration, and anticentralization. While the focus of much of their ideology was dedicated to critiquing leftward theological and social trends in the PCUS, many of the conservatives who would form the PCA would articulate a more positive vision of political, cultural, and religious conservatism, which would place the new body solidly on the right wing of American denominations and give it a larger-than-expected influence in the new Religious Right.⁵

In tracing out this argument, it is important to recognize that the creation of the PCA offered yet another example of the growing cultural divide between conservatives and liberals within American society as a whole and particularly in the South. Recent historians of the post–World War II period have noted the developing rift between progressives and conservatives throughout southern society. Before World

4. Kennedy Smartt, *I Am Reminded: An Autobiographical, Anecdotal History of the Presbyterian Church in America* (Chestnut Mountain, GA: n.p., 1998), 22, 56, 105, 115. Compare with Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). For the contested relationship between the OPC and other evangelicals, see Sean Michael Lucas, “J. Gresham Machen, Ned B. Stonehouse, and the Quandary of Reformed Ecumenicity,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 62 (2000): 197–222.

5. Rick L. Nutt, *Toward Peacemaking: Presbyterians in the South and National Security, 1945–1983* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1994); Joel L. Alvis Jr., *Religion and Race: Southern Presbyterians, 1946–1983* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1994); Jonathan M. Schoenwald, *A Time for Choosing: The Rise of Modern American Conservatism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 12; Sara Diamond, *Roads to Dominion: Right-Wing Movements and Political Power in the United States* (New York: Guilford, 1995); D. G. Hart, *From Billy Graham to Sarah Palin: Evangelicals and the Betrayal of American Conservatism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

War II, while the South may have been “solid” in a one-party way, it was far from monolithic. Deep divisions over industrialization, unionization, and desegregation wracked the Democratic party in the South, and created rival ideologies within the single partisan umbrella. While progressives articulated a worldview that exalted individual rights over societal norms, conservatives sought to buttress older social byways that maintained white supremacy, male hierarchy, and social-bond individualism. As the twentieth century progressed, southern Presbyterians would experience a “conflict of visions,” a culture war that southern and American society at large was and would be experiencing. Ultimately, southern Presbyterians resolved the internal conflict through the departure of conservatives who formed the “continuing church.” Still, the conflict within the PCUS provides yet another barometer of the changing cultural and social relations that the South and the nation endured in the final decades of the twentieth century.⁶

Although it was unrecognized at the time, the conflict that resulted in the formation of the PCA began early in the twentieth century. By the end of the nineteenth century, prominent PCUS ministers had moved away from the church’s historic commitments to confessional Calvinism and the spiritual nature of the church by espousing progressive theological sentiments and urging the social gospel as an appropriate response to the social ills experienced in the New South. By the mid-1920s, not only had conservatives noted these trends, but they began to articulate a position of conservative dissent that stressed fidelity to the older ways. Conservative professors such as W. M. McPheeters, the longtime professor of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary, partnered with pastors such as J. B. Hutton, the rock-ribbed leader of First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Mississippi, to work through the challenges raised by this

6. Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988); Numan V. Bartley, *The New South, 1945–1980* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1995); Pete Daniel, *Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Joseph Crespiro, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Thomas Sowell, *A Conflict of Visions: Ideological Origins of Political Struggles* (New York: Basic Books, 2002); James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

“liberal group” in the church. Conservative ruling elders and ministers began to write to the Presbyterian papers, warning of the effects of the progressive agenda of confessional revision, social liberalism, and ecumenical activity. These conservatives stressed the importance of the “fundamentals” of the Christian faith as vital for the life of the church. They even sought to convince the church that ministers should commit themselves to certain fundamental doctrines by virtue of their ordination vows. By 1939, conservatives had come to believe that the situation in the church was dire, and they determined to make a stand. Led by a ruling elder from Charlotte, North Carolina, Tom Glasgow, conservatives attempted to charge the most prominent and popular progressive minister in the church, E. T. Thompson, with violating his ordination vows by teaching contrary to the Westminster Standards. When the church not only failed to discipline Thompson but exonerated him in 1941, conservatives became convinced that the progressives had captured the machinery of the church. In response, they determined to organize in order to battle for their church’s future.

While conservatives objected to the theological waywardness of their liberal counterparts, always in the background were objections to the progressives’ political and social agendas. In seeking to overturn the church’s long-standing commitment to the spiritual nature of the church, PCUS progressives intended to speak “prophetically” to their day and to work for the corporate reformation of American society. Generally, that meant involvement in a variety of social issues in the South, particularly racial integration. By pursuing social justice, progressives within the church were convinced that they could maintain Presbyterianism’s long-standing cultural hegemony. Maintaining this leadership position was vitally important for those who had long thought of themselves as the cultural custodians of American civilization. While southern Baptists and Methodists claimed overwhelming numbers—out of every ten churchgoers in the South, approximately five were Baptist, three Methodist, and one Presbyterian—southern Presbyterians were still the intellectual leaders. In order to maintain this position of leadership and to purify America from the dross of social ills, progressive southern Presbyterians saw themselves as

“prophets in the Old Testament tradition, prophets who dare to speak out boldly and are prepared to meet the fate generally meted out to prophets, and which some have met in our own day.”⁷

PCUS conservatives shared a similar goal with the progressives—to save Western civilization as represented in the United States of America. And they shared a similar identity as the progressives; both sides cherished the fact that they belonged to a mainline Protestant denomination. But the two sides differed profoundly over the method for achieving that goal. While progressives embraced a prophetic stance that sought social justice, conservatives stood as evangelists in the old-time sense, seeking for lost souls. Committed to mass evangelism as practiced by a long train of itinerants from Charles Finney to their new champion Billy Graham, PCUS conservatives worried that the denomination’s movement away from the fundamental doctrines of the faith would hamstring evangelism. If individuals were not being transformed by the power of the gospel, then American society would begin to disintegrate.

By the 1960s, conservatives were convinced that the church’s failure to maintain their historic evangelistic approach, which had been traded in for “evangelism as social justice,” had led to the gross moral and social failures of the rising generation. As Presbyterian (and other) children rioted in the streets, used drugs and exalted free love, marched on Selma, or burned their draft cards—encouraged to do so by youth leaders trained in the progressive theology of the PCUS seminaries—conservatives wondered whether the apocalypse was truly coming in their times. If so, it was the fault of the progressives and their transformation of the mission of the church. Increasingly convinced that they were “unequally yoked together” with denominational progressives, and fearful of the effect that this was having on American culture, conservatives believed that it was necessary to separate in order to continue a “Presbyterian church loyal to Scripture, [true to] the Reformed faith, and committed to the spiritual mission of the Church as Christ commanded in the Great Commission.” Only a

7. Ernest Trice Thompson, *The Spirituality of the Church: A Distinctive Doctrine of the Presbyterian Church in the United States* (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1961), 45.

church thus committed would have the political and cultural clout necessary to save America in the midst of its profound moral malaise.⁸

In order to accomplish this separation, early in the 1960s, southern Presbyterian conservatives began to forge their own shadow organizations within the church. Already *Presbyterian Journal*, which had been in operation since 1942, had rallied conservatives to their causes. The *Journal* had proved its worth in the defeat of reunion with the northern Presbyterians in 1954; key to the strategy was not only information provided to the church's masses, but also inspiration through an annual rally each August in Weaverville, North Carolina. Eventually called "Journal Day," the event served as a major meeting place for conservatives to network. In 1958, Bill Hill, pastor of West End Presbyterian Church, Hopewell, Virginia, left his pastorate in order to go into full-time evangelism, preaching revival and leading evangelistic meetings in the Billy Graham style. Hill preached in over a hundred meetings in his first five years of full-time evangelism, but he soon concluded that in order to make a real change in southern society and morals, he required assistance. In 1964, Hill formed the Presbyterian Evangelistic Fellowship (PEF), which was soon stocked with fiery "soul-winning" evangelists. PEF became a rallying point for conservatives, and their annual summer conference at the Presbyterian Assembly Grounds in Montreat, North Carolina, was one of the best-attended conferences each year. Eventually, PEF would branch into international evangelism, forming the Executive Commission on Overseas Evangelism that would serve as a mission sending agency.

A third organization, Concerned Presbyterians, was led by Kenneth S. Keyes, a ruling elder and real estate developer from Miami. Keyes had long been involved in conservative causes within the church, working to defeat reunion with the northern Presbyterians in 1954. As the lay leaders involved with the *Journal* saw the leftward turn in the church, they became convinced that they needed to organize ruling elders as a mass movement to save the church. Keyes was willing to lead this organization funded with seed money from the *Journal*; in late 1964, Concerned Presbyterians had become a reality and a thorn

8. Williamson, "To the Glory of God," 11.

in the side of the liberal leadership. The initial success of the Keyes group in raising consciousness convinced several ministers to gather informally to pray for revival within the denomination. As they prayed, they began to wonder whether they, too, needed more formal organization in order to make a final stand for the reform and renewal of the PCUS. As a result, in late 1968, Donald Patterson led these ministers toward creating Presbyterian Churchmen United, which would ultimately take the lead in forging a continuing Presbyterian church.

These four organizations—*Presbyterian Journal*, PEF, Concerned Presbyterians, and Presbyterian Churchmen United—formed the basis for the new denomination that would emerge in 1973. Two years before, leaders from each of these groups met in order to discuss the possibility of separating from the mainline church. Those discussions revealed the deep fissures among those who participated in the conservative dissent. Some, most prominently Nelson Bell, could not envision abandoning the PCUS; Bell repudiated the continuing-church movement and died a few months after completing his term as moderator of the 1972 PCUS General Assembly. Others, who had banded together as the Covenant Fellowship of Presbyterians, were uncertain that separation was the proper procedure at that time. These ministers feared the growing polarization within the church and desired to bridge the differences between its conservative and liberal wings. When the PCA was formed in 1973, none of the Covenant Fellowship ministers joined, awaiting some future time when apostasy would be plain and would demand separation. Still others, such as Robert Strong, pastor of Trinity Presbyterian Church, Montgomery, Alabama, had gone through prior church separations and could not bear to go through another. In the end, Strong resigned his pastorate, after which his church immediately voted to leave the PCUS and to join with the new continuing church.⁹

The ambivalence that some felt for the new denomination was epitomized within the one other vitally important institution for the continuing-church movement, Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi. Started with seed money from one of the leading

9. Robert Strong, "Why I'm Not Leaving My Church," *Eternity* (September 1973): 44–48; "Applause," *PO* (17 December 1973): 4.

conservative PCUS churches, the independent Reformed Seminary maintained an awkward relationship with the continuing-church movement. Founded to supply conservative ministers for the PCUS, the school produced a number of younger ministers who would support division in the church when the time came. In addition, Morton Smith, professor of systematic theology at the seminary, was one of the leaders promoting the separation, served as an adviser to the independent Vanguard Presbytery, and later acted as the PCA's first stated clerk. At the same time, Sam Patterson, president of the seminary, consistently repudiated separation as a strategy, going on record in late 1972 that he "was opposed, on the basis of Scripture as I understand it, to a division from or withdrawal from our denominational branch of the Church of Christ." Patterson was supported by recently hired Robert Strong, who had left his church to teach homiletics at the seminary, and by church history professor Al Freundt, who would never separate, maintaining his ministerial credentials in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) until his death in 2001.¹⁰

These realities provide an important reminder: not everyone who was involved in conservative dissent necessarily viewed the issues the same way or believed that separation was the answer. One of the ironies is that Nelson Bell, who did more than anyone else to lead others toward the creation of the PCA, failed to support it when the time came. Likewise, other conservatives who worked within the Covenant Fellowship of Presbyterians felt that those who led in the formation of the PCA were power-hungry, divisive, and too theologically rigid to make a successful denomination. This perspective came through in *Eternity* magazine, which claimed that the group forming the PCA "does not represent the mainstream of Southern Presbyterian conservatism, symbolized by *Christianity Today's* L. Nelson Bell, current moderator of PCUS." A couple of years before the PCUS merged with its northern counterparts in 1983 to form the PC(USA), many of those associated with the Covenant Fellowship withdrew and opted to start their own denomination, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church,

10. "Limited Appeal Is Made by Dissenters," *PO* (4 December 1972): 3; Patterson news item in *PO* (20 November 1972): 4.

rather than join with the PCA. A few conservatives associated with the Covenant Fellowship decided to lead their churches into the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, because they believed that the PCA was too fussy theologically. Clearly, the conservative-progressive division within the PCUS was far from neat and tidy.¹¹

And yet even though the division was challenging for some and disappointing for others, the PCA has existed for over forty years and represented a conservative mainline Presbyterian tradition. To put it differently, the PCA has sought to be evangelical Presbyterians and Presbyterian evangelicals, which has given the church a voice to the broader culture. Holding the church together has not been easy. For some, frustrations have arisen from the church's tendency to opt for an identity that is more comprehensive than pure. Others are disappointed that the church often spends a great deal of time on relatively fine points of Reformed doctrine instead of focusing on mission, cultural engagement, or evangelism. As the church gropes toward what Presbyterian identity means in the twenty-first century, however, it does so with the clear sense of itself as a church that preaches an inerrant Bible, offers a robust and winsome Calvinism, and motivates believers to share their faith with others. In offering this kind of Christianity to American culture, the PCA stands in the broad Presbyterian tradition that goes back to the founding of American Presbyterianism and runs through three hundred years of debates over what it means to be a Presbyterian church in America. And that debate continues today.

11. "Fireman, Fireman!," *PO* (11 October 1971): 8; "Opponents of Withdrawal Speak Out," *PO* (11 June 1973): 8; "Conservatives Split Southern Presbyterians," *Eternity* 24 (July 1973): 33; David B. Calhoun, *The Glory of the Lord Risen Upon It: First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, South Carolina, 1795–1995* (Columbia, SC: R. L. Bryan, 1994), 297–321; "No Comment Department," *PO* (7 January 1974): 4; "Unwelcome Prospect," *PO* (7 January 1974): 8.

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