

## **TURNING POINTS IN AMERICAN PRESBYTERIAN HISTORY PART 9: THE SPECIAL COMMISSION OF 1925**

D. G. Hart and John R. Muether

Progressive Presbyterians were not content with the revisions to the Westminster Confession that were approved in 1903. There was more work to be done to bring the Presbyterian Church into greater harmony with the modern world. The center of the progressive movement was in the Presbytery of New York, which pressed the liberal agenda on three fronts. First, on May 21, 1922, Harry Emerson Fosdick, the Baptist supply pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York, rallied liberals with his famous sermon, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" Although the sermon was a plea for tolerance, most Presbyterians—liberal and conservative—would have answered the title's rhetorical question in the affirmative, because it appeared that the conservatives were strong enough to force the liberals out of the church. A year later, the Presbytery took the provocative step of ordaining two graduates of Union Seminary who could not affirm the virgin birth of Christ.

Finally, the Presbytery convened a gathering in Auburn, New York, in December 1923. It produced "An Affirmation designed to safeguard the unity and liberty of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America." The Auburn Affirmation questioned the constitutionality of General Assembly deliverances that proclaimed certain doctrines as necessary and essential beliefs for Presbyterian ministers, and it went on to describe those doctrines (the inerrancy of Scripture, the virgin birth of Christ, the vicarious atonement, Jesus' resurrection, and his miracles) merely as theories about the Bible's message. Within a year, the Auburn Affirmation secured the signatures of 1,300 Presbyterian ministers.

Conservatives fought back in the General Assembly of 1924, when they narrowly elected a conservative moderator, Clarence Macartney, and managed to secure the dismissal of Fosdick from the First Presbyterian pulpit. The Assembly failed to take action against the Auburn Affirmationists, however, as many conservatives believed that they lacked sufficient votes to win that battle.

Instead, a showdown took place a year later at the General Assembly of 1925, meeting in Columbus, Ohio. Many commissioners were convinced of the creedal infidelity of the Presbytery of New York. Henry Sloane Coffin, however, was prepared to defend the Presbytery. He preached the preceding Sunday at the First Congregational Church of Columbus, the former pulpit of social gospeler Washington Gladden. In his sermon, "What Liberal Presbyterians Are Standing For," he put forth his case: "We question whether we have any right to call ourselves a Christian Church, if we exclude from its ministry any whom Christ manifestly does not exclude from the gift of His Holy Spirit."

The Assembly elected Charles Erdman of Princeton Seminary as its moderator. Although Erdman's theology was evangelical, J. Gresham Machen considered him to be the candidate of modernists and indifferentists. Upon his election, Erdman quickly proved Machen right. He held a two-hour private meeting with Coffin, listening to his plan to lead the Presbytery of New York and its sympathizers out of the Assembly, should the Judicial Commission rule unfavorably.

Desperately seeking to avoid a walkout, Erdman agreed to permit Coffin to read a protest if the Judicial Commission ruled against the Presbytery. The Commission did, in fact, determine that the

Presbytery had acted improperly in ordaining men who could not affirm the virgin birth of Christ, which was "the established law" of the Church. Conservatives seemed to be on the brink of victory, and liberals prepared to leave.

Then Coffin approached the platform of the assembly, as his biographer describes:

He was pale and showed the effects of the strained and sleepless nights during which he had been in conference seeking to avert this action. In a firm voice he read a prepared statement on behalf of the Commissioners of the Presbytery of New York protesting the decision as contrary to the constitution of the church and declaring the purpose of the New York Presbytery to maintain its constitutional rights in licensure.

But Coffin's threatened exodus did not take place, because of a bold and desperate move by Erdman. Yielding the chair to the vice moderator, Erdman proposed from the floor that the Assembly establish a special commission "to study the present spiritual condition of our Church and the causes making for unrest, and to report to the next General Assembly, to the end that the purity, peace, unity and progress of the Church may be assured."

Erdman's stroke of parliamentary genius was unanimously approved. Later that night he met with liberal commissioners and urged them not to leave the church until the Special Commission reported to the next assembly. Erdman then appointed fifteen committee members, mostly "respected loyalists." The most well known and influential member of the committee was his close friend, Robert E. Speer, secretary of the Board of Foreign Missions, who would later clash with Machen over the latter's claim of modernism on the Board.

In the ensuing year, the Special Commission met four times. Machen argued before the Commission that the cause of the unrest in the church was "reducible to the one great underlying cause," which was the presence of modernism in it. Coffin countered that the differences were due to "misapprehension." Fighting this battle would "plunge the church into calamitous litigation and hinder us from doing our work and building the kingdom of God." "It is ruinous," he continued, "to divide existing forces. We ought to work harmoniously together and emphasize those things in which we agree."

In the unanimous report that the Commission presented to the 1926 Assembly, it agreed with Coffin that there was "evangelical unity" in the church. American Presbyterianism stood for toleration and progress, shaped by "two controlling factors":

One is, that the Presbyterian system admits to diversity of view where the core of truth is identical. Another is, the church has flourished best and showed most clearly the good hand of God upon it, when it laid aside its tendencies to stress these differences, and put the emphasis on the spirit of unity.

Coffin could not have authored a more agreeable conclusion. "It seems to be everyone's wish to keep the peace," he wrote.

When the Commission presented its report, Clarence Macartney, two years removed as the Assembly moderator, moved to excise certain sections and to dismiss the Commission. His older

brother, Albert J. McCartney, rose in rebuttal with withering words of ridicule: "Clarence is all right, friends. The only trouble is he isn't married. If that old bachelor would marry, he would have less time to worry over other people's theology.... I know that if mother could come back, there would be room for him and for me to say our prayers in the same words on her knee at that old home of ours in western Pennsylvania. I believe there is room for him and for you and me, to say our prayers in identical language in the Presbyterian Church."

The younger Macartney's motion was denied, and in 1927 the General Assembly approved the final report of the Commission with only one dissenting vote. The effect was to grant freedom to the Presbytery of New York to reject the virgin birth of Christ as an essential tenet of the church, and to vindicate the signers of the Auburn Affirmation.

The report underscored that Presbyterian unity required the end of "all slander and misrepresentation" within the church. The focus of attention, then, fell on one particular source of recent unrest: the factions within the faculty of Princeton Seminary. The school's reorganization in 1929 brought two signers of the Auburn Affirmation onto its new, thirty-member Board. Convinced that this would lead the school into a decline into theological liberalism, Machen left Princeton and formed Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia.

The General Assembly of 1925 marked the decline of conservative strength in the Presbyterian Church; no subsequent assembly elected a conservative moderator. It also raised Henry Sloane Coffin's visibility in the church. Together with Erdman, he forestalled the liberal exodus that most observers regarded as inevitable. According to *Time* magazine, Coffin went to the General Assembly "as he had gone before, one of the many commissioners from the Presbytery of New York. He returned the acknowledged leader of the liberal elements of his church."

Nearly two decades later, in 1943, the General Assembly would elect Coffin as moderator, a symbolic vote in two respects. First, it confirmed Coffin's role in the church he nearly walked out of in 1925. Second, since he was president of Union Seminary at the time, the vote represented a healing of the breach between the Presbyterian Church and the Seminary in the liberal Presbytery of New York, and a vindication of Charles A. Briggs, fifty years after his heresy trial.

*Dr. Hart is the director of fellowship programs and scholar in residence at the Intercollegiate Studies Institute in Wilmington, Del.; Mr. Muether is the librarian at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Fla., and the historian of the OPC; both are OP ruling elders and members of the Committee on Christian Education. Reprinted from New Horizons, October 2005. Used here with permission.*