

## Theological Conflicts of the 1920s and 1930s in the Presbyterian Church and on the Princeton Seminary Campus

by EDWIN H. RIAN

### Princetoniana

For a number of years, Dr. Edwin H. Rian has been giving an informal lecture in Professor Edward A. Dowey's class in Presbyterian history. Dr. Rian, now 84, lived through the years of the 1920s and 1930s that saw this seminary divided. As a participant in what has been called the "fundamentalist-modernist" controversy, Dr. Rian left the seminary, became a leading critic of Princeton Seminary, and was finally unfrocked by the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America.

In succeeding years, Dr. Rian came to see these issues and events in quite a different light. He ultimately confessed the errors of his ways and asked the church he had bitterly attacked to ordain him again. He speaks here of the way those whom he attacked received him warmly again into the fellowship of the church.

This lecture has been edited for publication in the *Bulletin* so that our readers may hear a first-hand account by one of the participants who lived through these tumultuous events.

*Dr. Edwin H. Rian, now living in retirement in Alexandria, Virginia, has enjoyed a distinguished career in a number of Presbyterian institutions, including serving as president of Jameson College and as vice-president of Trinity University. In the midst of several retirements, he was invited by President James I. McCord to return to Princeton as a special assistant to the president. He served in this capacity for twelve years.*

This lecture is more or less what you would call a spiritual pilgrimage, because I was a participant in the conflict in the Presbyterian Church from the time I came on the campus in 1924 until I left the church and later returned. Most of the people who were here in my day have gone. I suppose one reason I am invited back annually is that I am one of the few persons alive today who actively participated in the conflict that is often called the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy.

When I started at Princeton Sem-

inary in September of 1924, I came early to take the Greek examination. That first night, I arrived after the offices had closed, and therefore didn't know where I could stay for the night. I was sitting on the steps of Brown Hall when a gentleman with gray hair and gray beard came by, asking what I was looking for. I told him my predicament, and he invited me to spend the night with his family. It turned out that this man was Dr. John Davis, who wrote the dictionary called, *Davis's Dictionary*. Later, Dr. Henry S. Gehman revised it and

it was renamed the *Westminster Dictionary of the Bible*.

I spent the next three years on the Princeton Seminary campus. In those days, one could be ordained as an evangelist, even though one did not have a church. So, just before commencement in 1927, I was ordained in the First Presbyterian Church, now called Nassau Presbyterian Church. Participating in the service were President J. Ross Stevenson and professors Charles Erdman, Frederick Loetscher, and J. Gresham Machen, who was Assistant Professor of New Testament.

At graduation I won the fellowship in church history, one of six fellowships awarded in those years. Of the six fellowships, five were won by men who would later form Westminster Seminary, and the sixth by a Lutheran who later became president of a Lutheran seminary in the midwest. The wonderful thing about those fellowships was that one could choose to go to a university or theological seminary for further study. I decided to go to Germany.

### I

Now I want to turn to a discussion of the forces which caused the controversy at Princeton Theological Seminary and in the Presbyterian church in the 1920s.

The first force was rooted in the majority of the faculty who wanted Princeton Seminary to be the standard-bearer of the Reformed faith interpreted as the strict Calvinism for which Princeton Seminary has stood for many years. These members of the faculty believed there had been a continuity from Archibald Alexander to Charles Hodge to Ben-

jamin Warfield to Francis Landy Paton. Their theological orientation was what I would call Reformed Scholasticism.

On the other hand, J. Ross Stevenson, who was a fine gentleman, had been made president in 1914. He had a different idea of what Princeton Seminary should be. Stevenson said the seminary should represent the whole church in its spectrum of theology.

To see this division between the faculty and President Stevenson in perspective, we need to remember certain historical events and movements. Let me name them.

The first one was the Old School and New School controversy. In 1801 the General Association of Connecticut and the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the USA entered into a plan of union. In this way a minister could serve in both churches. Samuel Hopkins was the theological leader of Connecticut Congregationalism. This group denied the depravity of man and denied that man was separated from God because of a relationship to Adam, the first man. Albert Barnes of the First Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia and Lyman Beecher of Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati were charged with heresy on these points, but were not suspended from the church. In 1837 the General Assembly of our church abrogated this plan of union. The Old School held the balance of power and the synods of Western Reserve, Utica, Geneva, and Genesee, strongholds of the New School, were excinded from the church. After the Civil War, the two parties forgot their differences and reunited in 1869.

The division between the faculty and President Stevenson was also affected by a revision of the Westminster Confession of Faith in 1903. Henry van Dyke was chairman of the revision committee, which worked to emphasize the doctrine of election, which was different, the universal design of Christ's atoning work, and infant salvation to all. Actually the attempt to revise the Confession of Faith had begun as early as 1889 with fifteen presbyteries organizing and petitioning the General Assembly. This effort failed due to men like Patton and Warfield at Princeton Seminary. In these same years the heresy trial of Charles A. Briggs of Union Theological Seminary in New York City, in part about inerrancy of scripture, resulted in his suspension from the Presbyterian ministry in 1893.

Then came the Declaratory Statement of 1903, which had to do with the love of God for all men unto salvation, instead of particularism of some unto salvation. This passed and became part of the doctrinal statements of the church.

The attempted union with other protestant bodies, which failed in 1918, also contributed to the division between the faculty and the president. So these three things helped bring about the explanation for the difference between Dr. Stevenson and the faculty of the seminary.

The second force that caused the conflict in the Presbyterian church was the Henry Emerson Fosdick affair. Fosdick was a Baptist minister who was invited to preach in the First Presbyterian Church in New York City in 1922. He preached his

famous sermon, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win." This sermon caused tremendous furor in the New York City Presbytery and in the church at large. Clarence McCartney, who was pastor in Philadelphia and later in Pittsburgh, organized meetings throughout the nation. They tried to pass an overture against Dr. Fosdick preaching, stating that every preacher who preached in a Presbyterian church should conform to the Westminster Confession of Faith. The General Assembly called upon New York Presbytery to require preaching and teaching at the First Church to conform to the Westminster Confession. But the presbytery did little to carry out this mandate.

The question has been raised, why is it that Machen became so prominent in this controversy. During the Fosdick affair, he wrote a book called *Christianity and Liberalism* which was published in 1923, making Machen one of the leaders of orthodox protestantism. Here is one little note that Walter Lippman, who was one of the outstanding journalists of his day, said about the book by Machen: "For its acumen, for its saliency, and for its wit, this cool and stringent defense of orthodox Protestantism is, I think, the best popular argument produced by either side in the current controversy." So you can understand how that elevated Machen to a place of prominence in the church.

The third force that caused this division, especially in the seminary, was the Auburn Affirmation. The signers opposed the five doctrines which Dr. Rellly of Minneapolis issued as a fundamentalist creed in

1918. These five fundamentals included: the inerrancy of scripture, the virgin birth, the substitutionary theory of the atonement, bodily resurrection, and miracles. The Auburn Affirmation asserted that it is wrong for the church to elevate these or any five doctrines as a test for ordination. These are only theories of the truths and should not be used as a test for ordination. In this connection I remember an incident in Machen's life. I suppose I was closer to Dr. Machen than any man. And so, when Westminster Seminary was launched we arranged for Dr. Machen to give lectures on the essentials of the Christian faith. I said, "Dr. Machen, you will have to give a lecture on the inerrancy of scripture." Note carefully his reply: "Ed, if I give a lecture on the inerrancy of scripture, I will lose credibility among the scholars in the theological world." Now, he did not say that he did not believe it, he did not say he would not espouse it, because in his writings he did, and publicly he did. But it showed me, when I look back on the incident, that he was a little leery of that doctrine.

What happened when the Auburn Affirmation was issued? In the General Assembly of 1924 no action was taken against the Auburn Affirmation because, even though Dr. McCartney was elected moderator, the conservatives did not have a majority. Dr. McCartney and others organized meetings around the country, especially in New York and Philadelphia, with the result that the General Assembly appointed a committee of fifteen to study the condition in the church and its causes.

In 1926 and 1927 the General Assembly committee issued its report, which urged brotherly consideration. No one was brought to trial. The fourth force was the reorganization of Princeton Theological Seminary. Let me here give you some local color on the seminary campus, which in those days had only 225 students—all men. Dr. Stevenson became the second president in 1914, succeeding Francis Landey Patton, who was president from 1902 until 1913. Patton thought of himself as "first among equals." He did not see himself as president as we think of it today. Stevenson, on the other hand, wanting the seminary to represent the whole church, worked to change the policy of the seminary.

The turmoil started in part because there was a rift between Dr. Machen and the majority of the faculty versus Drs. Stevenson and Erdman, Loetscher, Smith, Caspar Wister Hodge, John Davis, and Bennie Green took very little part in the controversy.

Machen commanded quite a following among students upon coming to the seminary. His book, *Christianity and Liberalism*, was widely read by students before coming to the campus, and his New Testament grammar was used for many years as much in liberal as in conservative seminaries. Machen was quite brilliant in his fashion. He was incisive and hit the doctrines head on. He and Dr. Armstrong spent more time teaching us the liberal rather than their own conservative point of view.

Another reason for Machen's popularity among students was his openness with them. Every time he

stayed on the campus for the weekend, he had a Checker Club meet in his room on the top floor of Alexander Hall and everyone was invited. In addition, he was very generous. He came from a wealthy family and had plenty of money. He used to stack up all kinds of choice fruits, apples, oranges, grapes, and nuts, and he left his door open even when he was not home, telling us to go in and help ourselves. That made him very popular with students. Machen also was the best checker player and the best tennis player on the campus in that day. In these ways he related to students beyond the classroom.

What about President Stevenson and Professor Erdman? I like both men, but as a whole the students regarded Dr. Stevenson as more or less of a church politician. That did not mean he was bad, but meant that he knew his way around in the bureaucracy of the church. Dr. Erdman was a wonderful Christian man, and I remember how we enjoyed going over to his house, something students did often. He was a charming gentleman.

There was also a great division in the student body in those days. In 1924 a conference of the Middle Atlantic Association of Students was held at Drew University. The Princeton delegation returned with a report that certain doctrines, such as the trustworthiness of the Bible, the deity of Christ, and the Virgin birth, had been slighted. As a result the student body, which was quite conservative, decided to join in forming a new association of students. They met in Pittsburgh in 1925 to found the League of Evangelical Students. President Stevenson op-

posed this organization because he said it would disassociate the students of this seminary from the other Presbyterian seminaries. But the majority of the faculty was very much in favor of the League.

The straw that broke the camel's back occurred in 1929. Up until that time, there had been two Boards of the seminary. There was a Board of Trustees to control the property and a Board of Directors that directed the affairs of the seminary. Stevenson wanted one board for its two purposes. In 1926, the General Assembly appointed a committee of five to study conditions in Princeton Seminary and report back to the General Assembly. In 1929, this special committee recommended that there be one board for the seminary.

This decision was made in the midst of controversy already existing on the seminary campus, heightening the tensions. And so it was that Machen, Oswald Allis, and Wilson decided to withdraw and appealed to students to join them in the formation of Westminster Seminary.

Westminster Theological Seminary was founded on a property in Philadelphia owned by Dr. Allis. About fifty students withdrew from Princeton Seminary, among them five of my classmates, to join in the formation of this new seminary. My involvement began when the faculty members asked me, as a student just out of seminary and just returned from Germany, to join them in affirming the need for this institution. My first job was to go around the country and raise funds for Westminster Seminary. I went from coast to coast and border to border to build up backing for the seminary. It was

a struggle, but I believed in the cause. When we withdrew, we decided to form an Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions, of which I was the first secretary. We thought that the established Board of Foreign Missions was too liberal.

This action led to great turmoil in the church. I say this with great regret. We young men—I was only in my early thirties—tied up the church for about five years. We studied the Book of Order. We learned how to tie up presbyteries. I remember one General Assembly in Cincinnati. The *New York Times* sent what was called a by-line writer. In my day the by-line writer was a special kind of reporter. And they sent him to report on the General Assembly and the fact that we were going to be ousted. It developed that he took our side, and every reporter's column in the *New York Times* was in our favor and against the General Assembly. The General Assembly finally passed a resolution against the *Times*.

In 1936, a judicial commission reported to the General Assembly that we should be put out of the church. But more than that, the commission said we should be unfrocked, which meant that our ordination was made null and void in the Presbyterian Church. And so it was that in 1936 Machen and several other members of the Independent Board, including myself, were unfrocked by the church. We responded by forming another church, calling it the Presbyterian Church of America. However, the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. brought a suit against us, and a court finally declared that our name was too close to the church we had left. We then chose the name, the Or-

thodox Presbyterian Church, which exists to this day.

## II

What is my evaluation of the conflict? First, we were fighting Christians and not the world, the flesh, and the devil. What we did in retrospect was to elevate certain convictions and declare them to be essential to a church. If you follow the controversies of the past decade you can see a similar pattern. For example, a small group of Episcopal churches withdrew from the main body of the Episcopal Church a few years ago. The group that withdrew said the Episcopal Church was not giving enough emphasis to the transcendence of God but was rather stressing immanence; God's presence in the world. Now that issue certainly is not essential. Then there is the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. They had a conflict recently about the inerrancy of scripture. Like the Episcopalian episode, those who withdrew could not say that the other group was not Christian. And the Missouri Synod could not say that men like Martin Marty were not Christian. In recent years churches withdrew from what was the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. But those that withdrew could not say that the rest of the Southern Presbyterian Church was not Christian. So I say that these divisions are on what I call non-essential doctrines of the Christian church. And that is what has happened in the history of the church again and again.

Second, there is a self-righteousness and an intolerance in the attitude of withdrawal. I take myself as an example. We thought we had a

corner on the truth and a pipeline to God. We thought we were absolutely right and the rest of the world was wrong. We felt like we were on Mount Olympus looking down on the rest of the Christians. I think of the attitude of my parents and my sister and her husband. They all said, "You can't tell us we were not theologians, that Machen is right and everybody else is wrong." And that's how far off we were. We were so sure that we were right.

Third, there was a certain rigidity of doctrine. We had a closed system of doctrine. We thought that the Westminster Confession of Faith was inspired. But creeds are dated and reflect the views of the time. The Westminster Confession is a human document. God is the source of truth, but our views of truth are in a process of development. If you look back at the church Fathers, to a man they all opposed separation from the church for these issues—including Charles Hodge, which may surprise some people.

Now, what is my conclusion? I returned to the church in June 1947, to the presbytery of Philadelphia in Wayne, Pennsylvania, and I was ordained. And of course it made the headlines in the newspapers. Front page in Philadelphia. And when I returned to the church, I did it because of a personal study of Calvin's Book IV of the *Institutes*. I did not try to influence anyone. I decided this on my own. I went to the church and I made a confession of my sins and they accepted it and they re-ordained me in June 1947. And the strange thing is that the men who were my greatest opponents turned out to be my best friends. They said,

"Ed, the thing for you to do is to get away from Philadelphia." I had an invitation to go down to Trinity University as Vice President and I accepted. I travelled all over the state of Texas lecturing on Christian education on behalf of Trinity University. I am happy to say that Trinity University now has fifty-two buildings because we helped them move from Wachahachie, Texas, down to San Antonio. Today they have a growing endowment which is remarkable.

After I came back into the church and was serving at Trinity, I invited Dr. John Mackay to Trinity to lecture. Dr. Mackay turned out to be a great friend. He put his stamp of approval upon my return to the church, and asked me to come up to Princeton to lecture at the Institute of Theology, which I did. Those lectures resulted in a book called *Christianity and American Education*. Since then I have been associated with two other Presbyterian colleges, two seminaries, and the Institute for Educational Planning. Dr. McCord invited me to come back to Princeton as assistant to the president, where I served twelve years. I was privileged to help raise some funds to increase the endowment of the seminary as a means of helping students in the future.

I have been subjected in fifty years to the right and to the left in theology and in higher education. I believe I know the main arguments on both sides. My final word is that truth is like a house. It has sides on it to give meaning and unity, but it does not have a roof. Thomism has a roof. If you accept its premises, you can deduce everything. But the reason

why we have no roof on the house of truth is while truth is eternal in God, our interpretation of the truth and our insight into the truth is a growing thing. As we understand the world better and as we understand ourselves better, then we have a greater conception of what the truth is. And that is what I pray for each one of you: have an open mind so you will understand the truth.

I have two texts to leave with you.

"God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself." That is number one in my book. Number two: "Love the Lord thy God"—there is the perpendicular relationship—"and thy neighbor as thyself"—the horizontal. Your preaching and teaching should have both, the personal relationship to God and the horizontal aspect of your relationship to society, to your neighbors, and to the world.