

Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

Vol. IX, No. 5

© Institute for Christian Economics, 1985

Sept./Oct., 1985

HOW PRESBYTERIANS LOST THE BATTLE

by Gary North

About 23 years ago, I began a project which, if things go well, I will complete early next year. I haven't worked full time on it. In fact, I let it sit for about 21 years. But it has fascinated me the whole time. It is a study of how the modernists (theological liberals) took over the northern Presbyterian Church.

After a detailed study of the theology, strategy, and tactics of the modernists, I have come to some preliminary conclusions about how they did it. More than this: I think I have been able to discover a strategy which they successfully used to capture not only the northern Presbyterians but virtually all the mainline denominations except the Missouri Synod Lutherans.

Someday, I hope to supervise the publication of a series of detailed volumes devoted to a denomination-by-denomination account of how and when the modernists captured each one. I realize that the market for this series will be limited, but it needs to be produced, not only for historical reasons, but also for reasons of institutional self-defense in the future. We need to see to it that when revival comes, and God's churches grow, that we do not experience a repetition of these events. We may make new institutional mistakes, but I pray we will not make the old ones.

I have analyzed the modernists' program of conquest for the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. (northern Presbyterians), from 1869 until 1936. The liberals adopted a strategy which was consistent with their worldview, and then they adopted tactics that were consistent with their strategy. It is important to understand that this program was consistent. It was not devised in some back room (so far as I know), but it had a logic of its own. This logic was a development of the theology of liberalism-modernism.

The conservatives in the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. did not see what their opponents were doing after 1895. They did not devise a counter-strategy. The old rule of politics governed the developments within the Church: you can't fight something with nothing. The consistency of the modernists was based on their willingness to work out the implications of their worldview within the context of the denomination. It is my contention that a majority of the evangelicals also were consistent to their theology, and this is why they surrendered until 1923 without a major fight, and why, when they began to resist in 1923, they had in principle lost the battle by 1926.

Let us consider the theology of modernism and its implications. I can do no more than summarize very briefly the basic position. In my forthcoming book on the capture of the Church, *Rotten Wood*, I will fill in the historical details and provide the documentation.

Presuppositions

There is no permanent plan of God which provides coherence to the universe.

There is no inerrant and permanent verbal revelation of God to man.

There must therefore be an inerrant word of man in order to provide coherence in the universe.

This inerrant word is evolving: "dynamic," "progressive," "process-oriented," "dialectical," and therefore *relative* over time.

Creeds are men's verbal representations of a symbolic (zero fixed content) representation of God, rather than men's verbal approximations of God's permanent word.

The essence of the church's ministry is concern for mankind rather than the defense of the integrity of God's word.

The unity of God must be reflected in the unity of man.

The unity of man must be reflected in the unity of man's institutions.

Creeds divide mankind.

Any institutional disunity must be smoothed over dialectically, until such time as the forces of unity can purge out the pro-creedal elements.

Strategy

The goal is the attainment of institutional control of as large an organization as possible.

Seminaries are targeted first: the recruiting of the next generation, plus your enemies pay your salary. Also, an educational institution is inherently co-operative: financing and recruiting.

Denominational colleges are targeted (same reasons).

Emphasis on certification by establishment humanist institutions of higher learning as the preferred (later, required) criteria for service in denominational institutions of higher learning.

Emphasis on educational credentials for highest church positions. (Liberal and ecumenical ethos dominates formal education generally, as does the doctrine of "academic freedom," which can be transferred to other institutions.)

Centralized agencies within the church are targeted: your enemies pay your salary. Also, a denominational institution is inherently co-operative: financing and recruiting. Personal recruiting of bright or popular young people.

Recruiting of wealthy or powerful laymen with offers of prestige positions or the promise of future influence.

Infiltration of the church's publishing outlets.

Creation of new publishing outlets within the church.

Institutional confrontations are initially avoided.

Co-operation with other churches or ecclesiastical

groups is fostered (ecumenicists inside all groups support each other).

Reliance on other people's money at every stage, if possible.

Tactics

The Bible's language is adopted to advance the cause of the unification of man.

Calls for creedal discipline are resisted in the name of toleration ("pluralism").

Emphasis is placed on practical religion: emotional benefits, feeding the hungry, etc.

Shared concern for mankind is placed on a par (and then above) "divisive" concern for creeds or doctrines.

Pleas for peace are repeated whenever the creedalists begin to organize their forces.

Implementation of all procedural protections against false charges of heresy, and the issuing of warnings concerning the high costs of such a fight, and the institutional sanctions to be imposed on people who bring unprovable accusations.

All battles against enemies are conducted in terms of institutional criteria, not creeds: toleration, peace, and (in the final stages) obedience to hierarchical authority.

Mastery of the church's bureaucratic machinery. Placement of allied forces in these permanent bureaucratic positions.

Strengths and Weaknesses

The great strength of the Presbyterian Church was its commitment to scholarship. It withstood the inroads of higher criticism for many decades. Eventually, these assaults had to be met, but after the successful heresy trial of Prof. Charles Briggs in 1893, the orthodox forces never again mounted a successful heresy trial. This gave the modernists a "free ride." The seminaries, Princeton excepted, suffered greatly as a result. Modernism, especially anti-biblical textual criticism, eroded the theological foundations, while Darwinism was beating down the gates. The compromises with Darwinism made by President McCosh of Princeton University and even by B. B. Warfield made it very difficult for those who followed to shore up the defenses.

Once Darwinian categories got into the thinking of Presbyterian college and seminary professors, they were willing to draw the relevant conclusions. Their Darwinism was not fully self-consistent. It had to be sold to the faithful, so it could not be presented in an unvarnished form. But the basic presuppositions were adhered to: denial of a six-day creation, denial of a short history for mankind, denial of a clear-cut distinction between saved and lost. Eventually, the more liberal conclusions took root: unity of man, necessity of environmental transformation in order to "save" man, and the elevation of civil government to the position of saving institution. This did not take place immediately or widely; it was limited prior to 1936 primarily to the New York Presbyterian and the graduates of Union Theological Seminary in New York City and Auburn Theological Seminary in upstate New York. But the conservatives found it too expensive or institutionally impossible to dislodge the heretics in New York.

The modernists within the Church had formidable intellectual opponents, unlike the liberals in other denominations. These conservative scholars, most notably Warfield, the Hodges, and later, J. Gresham [GRESSum] Machen [MAYchin], were not fooled by textual criticism, and they recognized that the liberals were promoting a rival religion. Nevertheless, the forthright stand taken by Machen after 1922 was insufficient to rally the troops. There was a very good reason for this: the troops had compromised with weak theology as early as 1869, and they grew weary of fighting "mere theological" battles in an age which was consummately pragmatic. The conservatives wanted peace above all, and results secondarily. They wanted successful churches and effective mission programs, and contention over the "fine points of theology" were viewed as detracting from the "real work of the Church," namely, growth. It was this implicit pacifism and pragmatism of the conservatives that the modernists successfully exploited.

The Modernists' Advantages

They had many. First, their leaders had considerable and growing protection in numerous seminaries. So did the conservatives' academic leaders, but the latter group was not cutting against the Church's grain. The modernists' leaders needed this protection early in the conflict. They needed money which would come despite the contrast between the laymen and the professors. Laymen could feel more secure about mounting an attack against a liberal preacher, or even easier, against an as-yet unordained man. They could never feel secure in an attack on an entrenched intellectual, whose argumentative skills were great, and whose institutional protection was greater.

Next, the modernists had the spirit of the age with them. The spread of Darwinism, the acceptance of political pluralism, the rhetoric of democracy, and the rise of Progressivism and liberalism all combined to give the modernists outside support. They could raise money from such sources, and for their opponents to fight them, they would have to challenge the spirit of the age. It was not random that Presbyterian fundamentalist William Jennings Bryan's overwhelming public relations defeat by Clarence Darrow at the Scopes' trial in 1925 was followed the next year by the defeat of conservatives in the Presbyterian Church and also by major setbacks for conservatives in the Northern Baptist Church. Embarrassment gutted the conservatives; it took over 50 years for them to begin to recover.

Conclusion

The modernists steadily gained ground in the Presbyterian Church because few men stood their ground and refused to let the modernists take it. The modernists did not have anything like a majority until after 1936. They had a plurality, however, because the creedal Presbyterians did not have the dedicated support of the conservatives. The seekers of power joined forces with the seekers of peace. Thus it has always been. The result was the capture of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. by those who did not believe in the creeds of the Church, but who did not attempt to change this creed until 1967. They bided their time, mobilized their troops, and won on the battlefield. Should we do any less?

Christian Reconstruction is published six times a year, alternating with **Biblical Economics Today**. It is published by the Institute for Christian Economics, a non-profit, tax-exempt educational organization. A free six-month subscription is sent to those who ask to be put on the mailing list. **Subscriptions:** P.O. Box 8000, Tyler, TX 75711. Donations are fully tax deductible. Checks should be made out to **Institute for Christian Economics**.