

**Report on the History of the CREC  
To the Eighth Presbytery of the CREC,  
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*by Christopher Schlect*

Like all created institutions, the Confederation of Reformed Evangelical Churches is a community that abides in time. An inquiry into our history is an inquiry into what the CREC is; it is a search for our Confederation's identity. Who are we? We move toward an answer by going back to our first presbytery meeting in 1998. But that's not enough; our Confederation is shaped by a past that is larger than our own collective ecclesiastical experience. You see, the world was already turning when the CREC came into being. Our identity has been shaped by factors which God in His providence had set in place well before 1998. Today my purpose is narrow; I will comment on the ecclesiastical world into which our Confederation was born. This, I believe, is one important aspect of our identity.

In the opening decade of the 20th century, Presbyterians softened their reformed distinctives by modifying the Westminster Confession and uniting with the Cumberland church. These developments appalled traditionalists like Benjamin Warfield. Presbyterians also played a leading role in forming the Federal Council of Churches in 1908. Their Old School Calvinism was being eclipsed by a more pragmatic view of the church's mission; the Christian gospel had less to do with reconciling hopeless sinners to a just and holy God than it did to solving social problems related to industrialism and urbanization. Analogous trends were just as evident in other communions.

The tendency toward doctrinal broadness concerned conservatives in the Presbyterian Church. In order to guard their communion from running off the rails, they influenced the 1910 General Assembly to hand down a doctrinal affirmation that set identified five points as being "essential and necessary" to the Presbyterian faith: the inerrancy of Scripture, the Virgin Birth of Jesus, the substitutionary character of His death, His bodily resurrection, and the authenticity of His miracles.

These "five points" became a bone of contention over the next two decades. Critics charged that the General Assembly had reduced the confessional position of the church down to five propositions, which in practical effect supplanted the fullness of the church's confessional standards. Over the course of these discussions, the General Assemblies of 1918 and 1923 formally reiterated these same five points of doctrine.

These debates spilled out beyond the Presbyterian fold as American Protestants in this era sought to codify the "fundamentals" of the Christian faith. The five points became one way Protestants defined the emerging term "fundamentalism," both within and outside of Presbyterian circles. The term was also shaped in common discourse through the publication of a famous series of articles entitled *The Fundamentals*, which appeared in twelve paperback volumes from 1910 to 1915. The

articles were written by leading Christian thinkers from various backgrounds, including Presbyterians. Southern California oil millionaire Lyman Stewart, together with his brother Milton, covered the costs for distributing these volumes free of charge to every pastor, missionary, theological professor, theological student, YMCA and YWCA secretary, college professor, Sunday School superintendent, and religious editor in the English-speaking world. Many of the articles challenged the “higher criticism” of scripture, and others defended the supernatural character of Christianity. The Fundamentals became a touchstone for the growing fundamentalist movement in the 1920s.

Significantly, neither the five points nor The Fundamentals were distinctively Presbyterian. In fact, their appeal crossed over familiar denominational lines. People who identified themselves with any of a variety of traditions, as diverse as Lutherans, Anglicans, Baptists, Pentecostals, and Roman Catholics, could heartily affirm every one of the five points. But there were also persons in each of these traditions who were concerned about the fundamentals. By the close of the 1920s, the labels “fundamentalist” and “modernist” carried greater meaning for classifying an individual Christian than denominational labels such as Methodist, Episcopalian, or Presbyterian. Many who called themselves “fundamentalists” sensed a deeper kinship with fellow fundamentalists in other communions than with non-fundamentalists within their own. Fundamentalism was a sort of ecumenical movement in the sense that it brought together Christians from diverse denominational backgrounds. But in another sense it was divisive because it defined itself over against “modernists” or “liberals,” those who downplayed supernaturalism, and thus they stood against people they found within their own denominations. Fundamentalists and modernists struggled against one another within Protestant denominations, and joined forces with their respective cobelligerents in other denominations. The net effect of all this was a thorough destabilization of the traditional sectarian categories by which American Protestantism had been organized.

Fundamentalists bound themselves to one another through Bible conferences, retreat centers, Christian colleges, common literature, and in other ways. But by and large they did not organize themselves into churches. And when they did form into churches, they tended to be self-starting, independent of one another and, most importantly, independent from communions that had real history. They had little concern for creeds, confessions, liturgy, and church polity; these matters took a back seat, and in some instances, they faded entirely into oblivion. These were circles where “true spirituality” could be defined without any reference to the church.

But we are talking about what historians rightly refer to as “the progressive era.” This was an age of robust activism and “making a difference.” If the sociological expression of “true spirituality” happened without reference to the church, where did it take place? The Progressive impulse—including the fundamentalist movement itself—was born out in the public sphere: mass media, education, commerce, and politics. These were the venues where Christians located true piety; if it had no practical effect in these areas, then it was not true piety.

And this presents an irony, for fundamentalists and modernists shared the same notion of piety. Presbyterians who reorganized Princeton seminary along modernist lines, who questioned the Virgin Birth and the resurrection, and who put J. Gresham Machen and his colleagues out of the church, were the very same Presbyterians who advocated legal prohibition of alcohol, legal

prohibition of divorce, membership in the League of Nations, restrictions on child labor, and a movie rating system—all as issues of basic Christian principle. These principles were embraced in General Assembly overtures that carried by huge majorities in the 1920s and 30s—majorities proportional to the overtures which reorganized Princeton Seminary and which sustained the judicial action against Machen. In other words, fundamentalists and modernists were indistinguishable when it came to social activism; they shared the same public marks of true piety.

While fundamentalists and modernists grasped after the same headlines and took up common cause for the Christianization of America, there were some Protestants who weren't playing their game. These faithful Protestants still cared about creeds and confessions and liturgies and church polity, and they did not define piety according to public success. They rejected both fundamentalism and modernism—that is, they rejected pietism. These were what Darryl Hart calls “confessionalists.” They did not make the front pages, they did not seek out the front pages, they did not grasp after numbers and were, by mid-20th century standards, profoundly impractical. But they were true churchmen. In the middle of the century the confessional heritage was strong in the Christian Reformed Church and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

We in the CREC are recovering from 20th century fundamentalism and pietism. As pietists, we tried to be relevant to culture and to make a difference, but we learned that the more relevant we tried to become, the more shallow and fragmented, and at last, the less relevant, we became. As fundamentalists, we wanted to hold up the Bible as our standard of truth, but we came to learn that without owning the church as the “pillar and ground of the truth,” a high Bible is no longer a precious Covenant document, but Gnostic emptiness.

God protected us from ourselves. He protected us through all our silly political lobbying, our taste for Contemporary Christian music, and our media-frenzied vision for ministry, even as we neglected the church. He has been kind to show us our folly, and to restore us to our mother. We in the CREC are in love with our creeds and confessions and liturgies and our church government. For our merciful God has rescued us out of the 20th century.