CLASHING COVENANTERS
The East End Controversy in the Reformed Presbyterian Church
By Richard L. Lindberg
Unlike today, when many religious groups advocate political participation, in 1890 and 1891 the Reformed Presbyterian Church (Covenanter) endured an internal controversy over the denomination’s restriction on church members voting in state and federal elections. On one side were the majority of ministers and elders who supported this restriction, a position known as political dissent. On the other side was a small group that advocated change of this restrictive policy in the name of inter-church cooperation, evangelism, and a more open church membership. Following actions in the Pittsburgh Presbytery in 1890 and at the denomination’s annual Synod in 1891, the minority group was deemed in violation of church teaching, cementing the split.

This controversy was but one example of the conflicts in American Presbyterian denominations between traditionalists and progressives in the late 1800s. That era saw heresy proceedings against seminary professors Charles Augustus Briggs and Henry Preserved Smith for their progressive views on the Bible. While the church trials in Pittsburgh are less well known, they also dealt with disagreements over church doctrine by asking if political dissent was based on the teachings of the Bible, and if Christians could vote. News coverage of the trials was reported by wire services in cities across the country that had Reformed Presbyterian Church congregations.

Reformed Presbyterian history in Western Pennsylvania begins around 1779. By 1890, the Pittsburgh Presbytery had 2,593 communicant members and 27 Covenanter congregations in the Pittsburgh Presbytery meeting regularly in Allegheny City, downtown Pittsburgh, East Liberty, Wilkinsburg, McKeesport, Monongahela, Pine Creek, and other places in Western Pennsylvania, Ohio, and West Virginia. The theological seminary of the church was located in Allegheny City.

Pittsburgh is noteworthy for two other events in American Presbyterian history. On May 26, 1858, at City Hall (an auditorium in downtown Pittsburgh), the United Presbyterian Church in North America was born as a merger between the Associate Presbyterian Church and the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, and the Old School and New School Presbyterian schism of 1837 was healed in 1869 at the Third Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh.

A distinctive doctrine of the Reformed Presbyterian Church held that the government of the United States was illegitimate because the U.S. Constitution did not recognize Jesus as King or recognize the supreme authority of the Bible. The roots of this criticism are found in Scotland and the acts of national covenanting between church and state. There, these covenants were taken so seriously that Covenanters believed that if the king broke
the covenant, they no longer owed him allegiance. Reverend A.M. Milligan, pastor of the Pittsburgh congregation, summarized the Covenanter position by comparing the government’s position of separation of church and state to a war of rebellion against God:

This nation is in rebellion against the Lord and His Christ to-day, just as really as the Confederate States were in rebellion against the government eighteen years ago. It has set up a government in the territory of the Lord, and over the subjects of the Lord, without acknowledgement of His authority. Is that not rebellion?

Thus convinced that the government was illegitimate, the annual Synods of the Reformed Presbyterian Church instructed church members not to vote in local and national elections or to serve on juries.

This policy of political dissent presented problems for the church in its relationships with other churches as well as in its ability to welcome new members who wanted to perform their civic as well as religious duties. As Reverend David McAllister acknowledged in 1891:

It must be admitted that the faithful maintenance of Covenanter principles and practice has prevented many persons from acceding to this congregation [the Pittsburgh congregation on 8th Avenue]... it has been distinctly stated that the position of political dissent has been the only thing that has stood in the way of uniting with the Covenanter Church.

Thus, the Covenanter doctrine of political dissent hindered church union. In 1887, the United Presbyterian Church and the Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America met to discuss merging. Their discussions were amicable, but they could not
get past the issue of political dissent. The United Presbyterian Church was flexible; it left it up to the individual conscience to decide if the government complied "with the requirements of the Word of God." The Reformed Presbyterian position was not: it forbade church members from voting. Talks in 1890 regarding reunion with the Reformed Presbyterian Church, General Synod, also foundered on this same question of political dissent.

In 1871, the Reformed Presbyterian Church continued the tradition inherited from its Scottish roots and covenanted with God and themselves to "serve God, keep his commandments, and adhere to the Reformed Presbyterian principles and testimony." The covenant acknowledged the basis for political dissent:

The nation refuses to own its responsibility to God and to the Mediator, to recognize the supremacy of the Bible in national affairs, and to countenance and encourage the true Christian religion.

In response, church members promised allegiance to the church and God over state:

We will pray and labor for the peace and welfare of our country, and for its reformation by a constitutional recognition of God as the source of all power, of Jesus Christ as the Ruler of Nations, of the Holy Scriptures as the supreme rule, and of the true Christian religion; and we will continue to refuse to incorporate by any act, with the political body, until this blessed reformation has been secured.

At its 1888 Synod meeting in Pittsburgh, the Reformed Presbyterian Church required that its congregations ensure their members did not identify themselves with the nation by any act that demonstrated allegiance to the national government. Those members who did were to be excommunicated from the congregation.

Four comments may be made about the Covenanter position on political dissent. First, it may be considered anachronistic based as it is on an agreement constructed for another place and situation. The Solemn League and Covenant of 1643 bound England, Ireland, and Scotland to national reforms of religion under the Lordship of Christ. Carrying their commitment to the Covenant and the idea of national covenants of religion to North America, the Covenanters (with other Christians) were disappointed when the U.S. Constitution omitted positive references to Jesus and the Bible.

Second, the Covenanter position was somewhat politically inconsistent. Covenanters believed in government, especially its divine origins, while not believing in voting. Third, the position was contradictory with the Westminster Confession of Faith's teaching on the civil magistrate. The Confession held that "It is lawful for Christians to accept and execute the office of a magistrate," and to pray for the magistrates without consideration for their religious views. "Infidelity, or difference in religion, doth not make void the magistrates' just and legal authority, nor free the people from their due obedience to them."

Fourth, the Covenanter position known as political dissent represented a rejection of the Enlightenment's religious neutrality, which is present in the Constitution.

Troubled by the role political dissent played in preventing church union and its use as a test of church membership, 17 ministers presented a statement for unification based on the need for evangelization of the "masses in all lands" in the face of attacks on religion and morality such as liquor and tobacco sales, Sunday newspaper sales, and mail delivery. They also protested the inclusion of political dissent as a qualification for church membership that was not required by the Bible.

In July 1890, nearly 30 dissenting ministers, elders, and lay persons met at the East End Reformed Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh. The resulting East End platform called for inter-church cooperation based on faith in Christ, restricted participation in the Lord's Supper, pulpit exchanges among evangelical Christians, an organic union of all Christians, and free discussion in the church of its doctrines and decision. The most problematic portion of the platform, however, was its second plank:

II. That persons who make a credible profession of Christ should be received into church membership on their acceptance of our testimony and terms of communion without binding them to our explanation in the matter of political dissent or in other questions.

This meeting was reported by the Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette on July 23, 1890, under these headlines:
In Secret Session.  
Important Meeting of Reformed Presbyterian Ministers.  
An Organization Formed.  
One Result of the Recent Squabble in the Synod.  
Strong Platform Adopted.  

Because of the second point in the platform, seven of the ministers from the Pittsburgh Presbytery were charged with heresy, violation of their ordination vows, and breaking the covenant of the church at the October 1890 meeting of the Presbytery. Newspaper articles reporting the meeting of the Presbytery relayed the tension at the meeting. "Divided Covenanters" declared the Pittsburgh Press on October 15, 1890. "Covenanter War" was the headline in the Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette on October 16, 1890. "Clashing Covenanters" headed the Pittsburgh Press coverage on October 16, 1890.

A judicial commission was formed within the church to further investigate the matter. Its decision was announced in December 1890 and was accepted by an emotional vote of 25 to 4. The East End seven were suspended from their ministries, but they appealed this decision to the upcoming annual Synod of the church.

The seven suspended ministers were the Reverends Hugh W. Reed (minister in Youngstown, Ohio); William Lloyd Cummings Samson (minister in McKeesport, Pennsylvania); Albert Witsius McClurkin (minister in New Alexandria, Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania); Ottawassamie Brown Milligan (minister of the East End Reformed Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh); Ezra M. Milligan (minister of the Parnassus Church in Westmoreland County); Henry Wilson Temple (minister in Stanton, Jefferson County, Pennsylvania); James Renwick Johnston Milligan (minister in Allegheny City, Pennsylvania).

Four of these ministers had solid roots in the Covenanter heritage and were not strangers to the tradition of political dissent. Hugh W. Reed (born around 1856 in Pennsylvania) was the son of Covenanter minister Robert Reed who was a pastor in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania. O.B. Milligan (1861-1908), J.R.J. Milligan (1855-1924), and E. M. Milligan (1858-1935) were cousins. Their fathers (A.M. Milligan and J.C.K. Milligan) were ministers in the Reformed Presbyterian Church, and they were in turn the sons of Reverend James Milligan who had been a Covenanter pastor in Vermont, New York, Pennsylvania, and Illinois. O.B. Milligan would later be one of the ministers to pray at the funeral of President William McKinley. Henry W. Temple (1864-1955) was born in Ohio and held Covenanter pastorates in Kansas and Nebraska before coming to Pennsylvania. He would eventually become a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, representing Pennsylvania from 1913-1933. Albert W. McClurkin was born in 1864 in Ohio.

Several of the men were recent graduates of the Allegheny Reformed Presbyterian Seminary. J.R.J. Milligan had been ordained and installed as pastor of the Allegheny Reformed Presbyterian Church in Allegheny City in October 1885. Ezra M. Milligan and William L.C. Samson were Fourth Year students at the church’s seminary in 1888.

The trial before the Reformed Presbyterian Synod began five months later on May 28, 1891, in Pittsburgh, at the Eighth Street Reformed Presbyterian Church, and ended on June 10. While the trial gave the suspended ministers a venue to protest the conduct of the proceedings against them by the Pittsburgh Presbytery, observers suspected it would lead to a rupture in the small denomination. For the majority in the church who believed in political dissent, nothing less than an important component of the church's identity was at stake. Those on trial were defending their reputations and the idea of church unity.

In their defense, the ministers claimed that they had called the original East End meeting to correct misrepresentations of their views, expressed in their dissent from the earlier 1890 Synod, which had prevented their work from going forward. The platform was their attempt to put “on paper precisely what we did believe, in order that we might be held responsible for our beliefs, but not for the charges that were being so widely circulated against us.” They denied having any intent to bring trouble to the Reformed Presbyterian Church.

The testimony of the Reverend William Lloyd Cummings Samson in the prosecution of his “appeal and complaint” is representative of the defense offered by the others. He claimed that the Presbytery offered no scripture “to prove that the things charged as sinful and scandalous were contrary to..."
Presbytery “was subversive of the Biblical, Protestant, democratic, Covenanter right of free judgment, free discussion, and free orderly assembly.”

In response to these arguments, Reverend R.J. George of the Presbytery (acting as prosecutor) called attention to the petition from the Beaver Falls church (where he served as pastor), which reminded all parties of the position of Synod in 1890 regarding no future discussion of the issue of political dissent. The memorial charged these ministers with reopening the discussion “in a more aggressive and dangerous way than before.” This petition, along with others, had been referred to the Presbytery’s Committee on Discipline. The Committee enumerated the charges:

I. False and heretical teaching contrary to the Word of God and the accepted standards of the church.
II. Following divisive courses by assailing clearly defined doctrines and practices of the church.
III. Covenant breaking and apostasy in departing from past attainments and sworn engagements.
IV. Breaches of official trust by disregard of simple ordination vows, and the use of influential positions to break down what the church entrusted them to maintain.
V. Insubordination to Synod, and contempt of its authority.

The trial involved much heated parliamentary debate over the intricacies of church law and its interpretation, plus discussions over the applicability of American and Scottish trial court practice. Persons speaking on the floor were often interrupted with points of order and other questions. Moreover, the speeches during the trial tended to run long (in one case, six...
The length of the speeches and the length of the trial itself led to comments such as, "Mr. RILEY … I would desire to request … that the speeches be as brief as possible. It makes confusion in the mind when the speeches are so long." On June 9, in part of his comments, Dr. David McAllister observed, "if you were not so weary …" Said another, "If anyone wants to condemn their own case, and lose their case before this Synod, let them spend two or three hours off the question." Some persons were observed to be asleep through some long speeches. The New York Times headline on June 2, 1891, read "A Hornet's Nest in the Synod." As the trial wore on, another headline declared, "The Brethren Were Tired Out. Monotony in the Reformed Presbyterian Synod." The tone of the speeches by both sides eventually led to expressions of personal pain. The Reverend J.R.J. Milligan declared during the trial: Brethren, I have endured much. I have seen my congregation being scattered and driven away. I have felt my faith in man being broken and my feet about to slip at times out of the path that follows hard by the still waters of God's grace. But I thank Him who is my Saviour and Redeemer … that never once have I felt that smitting of conscience which comes from a consciousness of doing wrong.

Dr. R.J. George felt that the East End seven had personally attacked him in their presentations before the Synod. "Mr. Moderator, Fathers and Brethren," he declared. "I am not insensible to the gravity of the charges that have been made against me personally in your hearing in connection with these cases."

Throughout the trial, the East End seven asserted their loyalty to the Reformed Presbyterian Church, the scriptures, and the subordinate standards of the church, i.e., the Westminster Confession and the Testimony of the Reformed Presbyterian Church. They claimed to not even particularly disagree with the doctrine of political dissent, but only with its use as a test of communion within the church and between the Reformed Presbyterian Church and other churches. As the Reverend J.R.J. Milligan said, "We are not opposed to our church's position of political dissent. We are opposed to some persons' explanations of it."

The defenders of the Presbytery and its actions, however, questioned the loyalty of the dissenting ministers. R.J. George declared, "I do know that the principles of the East End platform are not in harmony with our standards, that it is subversive." Contrary to being the private views of the ministers, George noted that the platform had been propagated:

it was published in the papers; it was sent by the official secretary of the Meeting for issuance through the magazines of the church; it was issued in tract form, and sent out over the church in a circular form, as Dr. McClurkin
While the dissenters claimed to have no interest in dividing the church, the defenders of the Pittsburgh Presbytery claimed that they did. R.J. George declared, “it [the East End Meeting] issued a platform that was subversive of this fundamental principle [political dissent] ... and there was agitation.”

Charges of heresy and divisiveness aside, the main thrust of the trial was the belief by the East End seven that they had not received a fair trial in the Pittsburgh Presbytery. They were not only eager to explain the reasons for writing the second plank of their platform, but arguing to retain their jobs as ministers. On June 10, the Synod entertained several motions. One would have held that “there is no evidence of criminal intent on the part of the Pittsburgh Presbytery in these trials.”

This motion was defeated. A second motion before Synod read:

The Court finds that although in the review of these cases some informalities appeared, these have not seriously affected the procedure and conclusions of Pittsburgh Presbytery; It is therefore ordered that the complaints of injustice and wrong be and are thereby dismissed.

The debate on the motion was emotional. Reverend J.C.K. Milligan could not vote in good conscience for the motion because Presbytery did nothing to bring the seven ministers to repentance, and “because in the procedure they convicted these brethren without one shadow of proof.”

Another speaker declared his opposition to the motion:

I believe that the Pittsburgh Presbytery had been guilty of injustice and wrong ... upon the following grounds:

1st. Because the Presbytery failed to deal with them as Christian men. 2nd. Because the Presbytery allowed themselves to be controlled by the Elders Convention. 3rd. Because the Presbytery deceived them in the Judicial Committee by pretending to settle the whole matter, by giving them the right hand of fellowship, after getting their statements from them, which they afterwards used against them. 4th. Because they framed a libel against them without any evidence but their own statements. 5th Because they condemned them without sufficient evidence, and upon insufficient grounds.

In spite of such arguments, the motion carried by a vote of 96 to 37. At this point, the Reverend John Teas (a missionary in Alabama) asked his Presbytery to give him a letter of standing because he could not in good conscience remain in the church. After much debate, a second motion was presented to the Synod:

The Court finds that the Revs. H.W. Reed, W.L.C. Samson, J.R.J. Milligan, O.B. Milligan, and E.M. Milligan, having fully and distinctly avowed their presence at the East End Meeting, and their responsibility for its published Platform, thus putting the facts of the case beyond question, their appeals be dismissed.

Another intense round of debate followed, during which Reverend J.F. Carson of the Brooklyn Reformed Presbyterian Church abstained from voting because he intended to leave the church. The vote on this motion was “Ayes 129, Noes 26.”

As a result of this second vote, Reverends E.M. Milligan, J.R.J. Milligan, H.W. Reed, and W.L.C. Samson asked to be released from the Reformed Presbyterian Church to join other churches, as did John A. Burnett and J.K. McClurkin. In addition, 15 others filed a “dissent from the action of Synod in refusing to sustain the appeals of the ministers suspended by the Pittsburgh Presbytery.”

According to a newspaper report, the East End seven all became ministers in the United Presbyterian Church. J.R.J. Milligan served the Ninth United Presbyterian Church in Allegheny City from 1891-1903. The East End Presbyterian Church went to the United Presbyterians with their pastor O.B. Milligan. However, that congregation dissolved in 1947.

The trial left the doctrine of political dissent intact, sustained the charges against the East End ministers, and penalized disagreement from church doctrine. In an era of progress and reform, the Reformed Presbyterians stood firmly in their past. In retrospect, it is possible to conclude that the ministers were naïve in thinking that their agenda would not bring controversy to the church. The synod of 1890 had prohibited any other position than the one that the church affirmed. They had to know their platform would not be well received. As an article in a Pittsburgh paper observed, it was “a clear and direct stab in the Covenanter doctrine forbidding members of the church to exercise the right of franchise.”

Did the events of 1890 and 1891 play a role in the future direction of the church? Perhaps they did, even if not directly. While it has not merged with any other Presbyterian body, the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America now belongs to the National Association of Evangelicals and the National Council of Presbyterian and Reformed Churches. More significantly, the church changed its Testimony on the matter of political dissent. In 1928, the chapters in the
Testimony dealing with civil government and political dissent were rewritten. They were rewritten again in 1964, at which time it was decided that voting would no longer be a matter for church discipline.\textsuperscript{44} Article 15 of the current Constitution of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (adopted in 1989) declares:

The Christian, when such action involves no disloyalty to Christ, ought to be involved in the selection of and to vote for civil rulers who fear God, love truth and justice, hate evil, and are publicly committed to scriptural principles of civil government.\textsuperscript{45}

Even though Article 15 provides guidance regarding the characteristics of political candidates whom church members may vote for, it does reflect a major shift in the position of the church from a century ago, reflecting a broader trend of groups embracing an active role in politics. In light of this change, it seems certain that the East End ministers would support the direction taken by the church in later years. Perhaps their struggle in 1890 and 1891 was not in vain.

Richard Lindberg is a resident of Chester County, Pennsylvania, but was born and raised in the Pittsburgh area. He graduated from Alderson-Broadus College in Philippi, West Virginia, Westminster Theological Seminary, and Villanova University, both in Philadelphia. He is a librarian, genealogist, and amateur historian. He previously wrote the feature article “Living in Paradise: How Pleasant Hills Refused to Join the Cold War” for this magazine.

\begin{itemize}
\item The doctrine of political dissent in the Reformed Presbyterian Church taught that church members could not vote in elections, hold political office, or serve on juries because the United States Constitution did not confess Jesus as King or acknowledge the authority of Holy Scripture. The Reformed Presbyterian Church was the only American Protestant denomination to hold such a position. William M. Glasgow, History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in America (Baltimore: Hill & Harvey, 1888), 50-52. This position, however, did not prohibit church members from serving in the military, or from paying taxes. Nor did it mean that the church did not care about public life, as articles on national politics in the monthly Reformed Presbyterian and Covenanters indicated. Participating in military service would involve a certain inconsistency since the oath of enlistment for officers and enlisted men in the Army included a promise of support for the Constitution of the United States, Center for Military History, “Oaths of Enlistment and Oaths of Office,” <http://www.army.mil/CMH/faq/oaths.htm> (9 May 2007).
\item Amish and Mennonites were wrestling with the same question but for different reasons. Some Amish and Mennonite members voted. Those who did not voted explained their reasons as separation from the world, or the connection between politics and the use of violence, such as war. Theron F. Schlabach, Peace, Faith, Nation: Mennonites and Amish in Nineteenth-Century America, Vol. 2 of The Mennonite Experience in America (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1988), 155.
\item U.S. Department of the Interior, Census Office, Report of Statistics of Churches in the United States at the Eleventh Census, 1890 (Washington, D.C., Government Printing Office, 1894), 701. The total number of communicant members for the whole denomination in 1890 was 10,574.
\end{itemize}
In Secret Session, "Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette" (23 July 1890).

In Secret Session, "Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette" (23 July 1890). This headline would form part of the Pittsburgh Presbyterian corporation's case against the East End ministers.


The members of the judicial committee were the Reverends J.W. Sproull, David McAllister, R.J. George, D.B. Willard, and elders D.O. Brown and John Magee. "Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette" (22 October 1890).

"Five Ministers Suspended," "New York Times" (12 December 1890).

Owen F. Thompson, "Sketches of the Ministers of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America from 1888 to 1930 (s.l., s.n., n.d.)."

Reformed Presbyterian and Covenanter XII, no. 7 (July 1875): 198.


Glasgow, History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America, 303.

Stenographic Report..., 35.


In a sermon preached at the Pittsburgh congregation ten days before the trial began, Dr. J.W. Sproull declared, "Church courts should enforce impartially the law... If the views of our members become so modified that they no longer... conform to our practice, they should leave... If she is to maintain her distinctive position, the church must enforce with discipline her teachings..." Quarter-Centennial of the Pittsburgh Congregation of the Covenanter Church: 1866-1891, 167.

Stenographic Report, 66.

Stenographic Report, 93.

From Matthew 22, he quoted Jesus' words, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." Romans chapter 14 instructs Christians to accept each other and not to pass judgment on each other. In Revelation 22, Jesus warns against adding to or taking away from the words of Scripture. By citing these passages, Samson tried to make three points: believers have a responsibility to government, they should not judge each other's beliefs, and nothing should be added to Scripture that is not there. This last point was part of the argument of the East End ministers that political dissent was an extra-biblical position that should not be demanded as a requirement for faithful Christian living or for cooperation with other churches.

Stenographic Report, 94-98.

Stenographic Report, 154.

Stenographic Report, 363.