

The Cultures of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA)

Tim Keller – 2003

A CHART OF PRESENT PCA DIVISIONS

Note: We need a working 'map' of our denomination that is better than the 'Truly Reformed' vs. 'Broadly evangelical' map that so many people are using. This is just one 'take' on things, not intended to be a definitive or exhaustive. We would benefit if others would supplement and revise these descriptions in order to help us understand each other and progress as a church in biblical ministry and mission.

I. First, there are those I'll call the **Reformed-historicals (R-h's)**. (Some call themselves "TRs" – truly reformed; others identify themselves as "strict subscriptionists," or "Old Schoolers.")

Most in this group are united in the conviction that 'strict subscription' to the Confession is necessary. But their other main characteristic is that they look back to some historical form of Presbyterianism-- such as 19th century southern Presbyterianism and/or English Puritanism or some other--for their main inspiration. Reformed-historicals want to revive or maintain that older form (as they understand it) today.

- These brothers are deeply devoted to the British-Puritan understanding of the Regulative principle which was much less sensitive to patristic traditions and cultural issues than was Calvin. (E.P. Clowney believes Calvin was committed to the Regulative principle, but did not apply it so severely as the Puritans did.) As a result there is little desire among churches of this perspective for any variance in worship music, forms, and cultural expressions.
- The Biblical hermeneutic of the Reformed-historicals is very scientific-topical as was the 19th-century theology of Dabney, Thornwell, and Hodge. As many have pointed out, this period of theology was much more rationalistic than earlier Reformed theology (e.g. Calvin) and much less sensitive to Biblical-theological development in the Scripture as later Reformed theology (e.g. Vos, Kuyper, Ridderbos.) The R-h's therefore tends to use a proof-texting method which sometimes forces specific "Biblical positions" on matters that the Bible does not directly address.

Despite the affection some have for the "Old School" label, the terminology is inappropriate for application to current Reformed-historicals.

- The original Old Schoolers in the 19th century were fighting "New School Presbyterianism"--an encroachment of the New Divinity from New England which was truly undermining the traditional Reformed understanding of free will, total depravity, and substitutionary atonement. A key example of a New School Presbyterian was Beecher, who abandoned the substitutionary atonement for the moral government/or moral influence theory. Finney, of course, was a New School Presbyterian. It is hard to see anything like these kinds of doctrinal deviations in the PCA today. Using "Old School" to describe oneself, may uncharitably and inaccurately paint those who differ with the Reformed-historical as the theological colleagues of Beecher, Finney, and Nathaniel Taylor—but such views are not held in any branch of the PCA.
- Actually, the Old/New *Side* split of the 18th century is a much closer analogy to where the PCA divisions are today. The New Siders' emphasis on experience and personal conversion and lay-ministry and aggressive evangelism was opposed to the Old Siders' emphasis on doctrine, tradition, and church authority. These emphases can match much of what we see in the PCA today.

Summary:

What actually seems to divide Reformed-historicals and the rest of the PCA is not so much doctrinal differences as differences in perspective (and attitude) regarding how to communicate our doctrine and relate it to the post-Christian culture. To understand ourselves, we should abandon using the models of the Old-New splits of the past and see present brothers as having different approaches to culture in general. Niebuhr's five approaches are helpful here in making more appropriate distinctions for the present situation in the PCA. Much of the PCA consists of "Christ against culture" people (just stay separate.); Others are "Christ over culture" (take it over politically.); Others are "Christ and culture in paradox" (win individuals to Christ and let the culture then take care of itself.); Others are

"Christ transforming culture" (transform it from the inside with strategic infiltration of key institutions and persons.). It is not apparent (nor likely) that there are any true "Christ of culture" liberals in the PCA who basically believe that the main trends in our society are the work of God's spirit.

- The main goal of the Reformed-historicals is to safeguard the doctrinal purity of the church according to a past model deemed more orthodox than the present church.
- The main way the Reformed-historicals relate to the broader culture is, in Niebuhr's terms, as "Christ against culture." That is, the main thrust of activity and thought is in the direction of being a counter-culture against the world. Thus R-h's tend to scoff at what they perceive as the triumphalism or lack of spirituality in any stated desire of 'being a leader church' and 'transforming the culture.' (Note: This is not the position of the theologians, a sub-group of the Reformed-historicals. Theologians are much more oriented to changing the culture politically. The theologians are at logger-heads right now with those who follow the traditional 'spirituality of the church' teaching of the traditional Reformed-historicals.

Critique:

- **1st**, an observation from recent debates over subscription: Reformed-historicals are sure that 'strict subscription' will guard against liberalism, despite the fact that the OPC (which has stayed very biblically conservative) is not a strict subscription church and the CRC (which has drifted biblically) is. (Even the Church of Scotland was 'strict' during its downgrade.)
- **2nd**, Reformed-historicals are quick (and often right) to point out how modern evangelical practices are adapted to modern/post-modern culture, but the Reformed-historicals seem blind to the fact that their own practices are heavily accommodated to 18th and 19th century traditional culture. R-h's tend to think that they are being Biblical, but everyone else is being culturally assimilated – yet this thinking does not square with the historical realities.
 - The 19th century Reformed church (Dabney, Thornwell) and the Puritan church were also molded heavily by *their* cultures. Too much so. Mark Noll's new book America's God is masterful in showing that, despite their insistence that they were being strictly Biblical, their cultural commitment to 'common sense realism' etc had a huge impact on the theology of Dabney, Thornwell, and Hodge. Much good scholarship now reveals how the Puritans were also significantly affected by the individualism of 'early modernity.'
 - So it is just too simple to hold up 19th century Presbyterianism or Puritanism as the answer for today as if these forms were pure and untainted by culture.

Size:

A good guess is that 12-15% of the GA (which would consist of 4700 delegates if everyone was there!) would fit roughly in this voting bloc. However, in the average GA (1200 delegates) this group comprises more like 1/3 of the votes. (It should be noted that this group isn't homogeneous. As noted above, the more theonomic types are more active in secular politics and somewhat at logger-heads with those who stress the 'spirituality of the church' like Thornwell and Dabney. There are other more recent strains over 'the new perspective on Paul' and Norman Shepherd's mixture of faith and works.)

II. Second, there are those I'll call the **Reformed-conservatives (R-c's)**. (A very diverse group of groupings.)

These are brothers who are more temperamentally and culturally conservative than they are committed to a very specific historic form of Presbyterianism. In their approach to church culture some may not be very "Reformed" looking at all, but instead reflect more the character and developments of Evangelical fundamentalism. Many of the Reformed-conservatives don't like the strident rhetoric of the Reformed-historicals nor do they identify with the "Old School" theological distinctives. However, the Reformed-conservatives do share with the Reformed-historicals deep concerns, fear and anger about the emerging secular culture. The Reformed-conservatives are not a single 'bloc' of persons but are really a grouping of groups that share politically and culturally conservative perspectives. Thus the Reformed-conservatives constitute a 'swing' vote that can go either way depending on the issues in ecclesiastical setting such as General Assembly. Some sub-groups of the Reformed-conservatives:

- Some are politically conservative and have imbibed the whole list of conservative concerns and policies. Anything that smacks of 'political correctness' is voted against. Reformed-conservatives will be for evangelism but wary of any talk of 'justice' concerns – sensing these to be signs of creeping socialism. R-c's will be for rallying women to political causes (e.g., anti-

abortion efforts) but wary of giving women more to do in the church because to do so seems to give ground to creeping feminism, and so on.

- Some in the R-c block are people in smaller churches who simply don't like the perceived dominance of large churches. The efforts of large churches to move ministry and mission agendas remind many of the Reformed-conservatives of politics in the secular arena (or ecclesiastical battles in mainline denominations) where they feel the voices of smaller churches were ignored or even ridiculed.
- Some Reformed-conservatives identify with various organizations that thrived in the modernist/fundamentalist controversies of the last century and have come to believe that endorsement of six 24-hour creation days, or Christian schooling, or identification with a particular political party, or a particular view of economics or end times is a cardinal part of orthodox Biblical faith.
- Many of the Reformed-conservatives are younger, highly intelligent, well informed about culture and theology, but see the whole present culture as the enemy of their faith and, thus, feel the need to mobilize the church to be strongly resistant to any changes that seem to give ground to present cultural trends.
- Some Reformed-conservatives are people who are more dispensational and baptistic than Reformed in their sensibility. This group used to be larger in the PCA than it is now.

Summary:

The Reformed-conservative group is an umbrella category that is not so concerned for Reformed theological distinctives and that includes those who are broadly evangelical, fundamentalistic, political active, and often culturally antagonistic. Of course, many of those who hold these distinctions are standing for very good causes and are appropriately concerned for the moral decline of our culture. The R-c distinction is not meant to be critical of any particular position or cause but rather to hint at why so many persons in this category are present in the PCA even though they are not significantly concerned about Reformed theology in either its past or present expressions.

- Main goal of this Reformed-conservative group: to fight or stay free of liberalism.
- Main way this group relates to the broader culture is, in Niebuhr's terms, as "*Christ above culture.*" That is, take over the society/culture with Christian politics and individual evangelism. 'Propagating sound doctrine' is not as important an agenda item as it is with the Reformed-historicals.

Critique:

The Reformed-conservatives represent the 'party of inertia.' They are not church activists like the R-h's (above) nor like the R-e's (below.) That is, R-c's do not have a concrete program of reform or renewal in the PCA that they wish to implement. They recognize what they are *against* in the culture and when similar issues seem to appear in the church, the Reformed-conservatives will line up with the R-h's; thus, allowing the few actual R-h's to win votes in the General Assembly. Of course, any of us who believe in the Bible will be conservative on a host of social issues. However, the Reformed-conservative's conservatism is often more temperamental than Biblically based. Thus, this "umbrella" group is very susceptible to being swayed by conservative attitudes in the culture rather than by a conservatism that is based on Scripture's priorities. Thus, ironically, the very group that is most opposed to the culture is the group most influenced by it in the way views are expressed in the church.

Size:

In the late 70's (before the J&R with RPCES) the Reformed-conservative group was probably the largest grouping in the denomination. Even when the pastor of a church was either R-h or R-e, the ruling elders were simply *conservative*. I don't know what the numbers are now. The seminaries for quite a long time have been mainly producing either R-h's or R-e's. Perhaps 30-40% of the General Assembly includes this large "swing" group of Reformed-conservatives.

- III. Third, there are those I'll call the **Reformed-evangelicals (R-e's)**. (Called "Broadly evangelical," or, even, "liberals" by their General Assembly opponents, these brothers like to think of themselves as highly committed to Reformed theology that is more biblically than culturally derived and much more devoted to present-day 'missions and ministry'.)

The Reformed-evangelicals are people who Richard Lovelace sees as the 'red corpuscles' (distributing nutrients) of the church in distinction to the 'white corpuscles' (attacking infection) of the Reformed-historicals and -conservatives.

- The Reformed-evangelicals put far more emphasis on mission, evangelism, and church planting than the first two groups.
- I use the word 'evangelical' because these brothers feel much more affinity to the rest of the orthodox Protestant world than the Reformed-historicals do. The Reformed-evangelicals are willing to overlook some doctrinal differences with other evangelical churches in order to cooperate in ministry for higher Kingdom goals.
- This Reformed-evangelical group is less interested in enshrining one or two historic Reformed church-forms of worship and would rather draw on the breadth of the Reformed worship traditions and even create new forms so long as they are true to biblical principles.
- The 'ethos' of R-e churches is less austere than those of the R-h's and often the R-c's. Teaching is more a mixture of theology and personal application rather than simply doctrine instruction. There are usually less restrictions on women.
- In general, this group is more interested in 'figuring out' the secular culture and reaching it, rather than just withdrawing, confronting and/or resisting it.

Summary:

- Main goal of the group - releasing the church into mission. Sound doctrine is a means to this, not an end.
- Main way this group relates to the broader culture - I think most of the Reformed-evangelicals in the PCA would identify with Niebuhr's "*Christ and culture in paradox*." That is, if we flood the culture with evangelized people, then culture will change and justice will prevail. A smaller number of R-e's are "*Christ transforming culture*" and will put more emphasis on Christians modeling social justice and penetrating the arts, media, academy, and popular culture.

Critique:

1st, this group of R-e's, upon reflection, is not as unified as it may appear. The Reformed-evangelical group is also often more united in what it is *against* than what it is for. While most of the members of this group all agree that we should not enshrine the past, nor speak about culture or fellow believers with the stridency of the R-h's, the Reformed-evangelicals are not terribly united in what it would take to do mission in this world. For example, this group includes:

- More traditional mega-churches like Briarwood, Village Seven, Christ Presbyterian
- More 'Willow-Creekish' churches, and progressive mega-churches like Perimeter.
- 'Sonship/contemporary worship' churches like the New Life network and Christ Community.
- Churches more concerned with social concern and the poor like the New City and New Song churches and networks.
- The churches drawing more on ecumenical liturgical traditions like Intown Church, Atlanta, Trinity (Rye, NY), City Church in San Francisco, Christ the King in Houston.
- Sorry to leave so many people out of this list! But my goal is not to categorize everyone, but to show how different and maybe somewhat dissonant our visions for ministry really are.

2nd, the Reformed-evangelicals, desiring to penetrate the secular culture with the truths of the Gospel, will always be susceptible to adopting pragmatic approaches to ministry that are not reflective of Reformed/biblical distinctives. They are prone to evaluate their influence by size of church numbers rather than by evidences of transformation in society.

3rd, many of the Reformed-evangelicals view themselves as more representative of the heart of the Reformed tradition than the R-h's and R-c's--particularly in views of the role of grace in sanctification and the role of the church in society--but they are also more likely to remove themselves from ecclesiastical forums where these distinctives could/should unify and motivate the church. Out of disgust with the politicization of these bodies, the R-e's substitute sarcasm regarding their denomination for the ecclesiastical stridency of the R-h's and the cultural suspicion of the R-c's. Naïveté regarding institutional processes and an unwillingness to engage in the sacrifice needed to engage differing brothers with conviction lead the R-e's to concede the resources of the larger church to activist R-h's or R-c's and to withdraw into the comfortable autonomy of local church ministry.

Size:

Put all together, the Reformed-evangelicals probably represent the largest single group in the PCA but are vastly under-represented at the General Assembly level due to the sense that denominational structures too politicized to be effective or encouraging. They are the least likely people to register and vote in the G-A.

The Reformed-evangelicals are producing the greatest numbers of new leaders despite the fact that some seminaries like Greenville and Westminster in California are deliberately trying to produce R-h's and R-c's; and, other seminaries like Westminster, Covenant, and Reformed are producing (unwillingly!) a minority of students who are r-h's and r-c's. Still, unquestionably most of the new leaders produced by the largest seminaries are Reformed-evangelicals. This group of younger leaders tends to hold the most positive views about the future of the PCA. But when they assume the leadership of most of the thriving PCA churches they often find themselves confronting established leadership there that is more R-h or R-c in perspective as a consequence of the current culture wars that naturally create reactive responses in our biblically/politically conservative circles.

Probably this Reformed-evangelical group represents about 40-45% of the votes in the GA. And yes, it is true that the vast majority (though not all) of the largest, newest, and most vitally growing churches in the denomination fall into this category. This obvious ministry health is a big 'credibility' factor on the floor of GA, though as already indicated above, there is also a back-lash against it where small or static churches perceive the R-e's church growth to have been achieved by compromising traditional Presbyterian distinctives. Too often the back-lash may also be a simple feature of perceived disparities between the haves (recognized, growing and higher salaried R-e churches) and the have-nots (unrecognized, smaller and struggling R-h and R-c churches).

Overall Summary: George Marsden has spoken of 'doctrinalist' churches (those dominated by theological issues and concerns,) 'pietist' churches (those dominated by ministry issues and concerns,) and 'culturalist' churches (those dominated by social issues and concerns.) The PCA is basically a 'pietist' church (Reformed-evangelicals and most Reformed-conservatives,) with a vocal 'doctrinalist' minority (Reformed-historicals) and a smaller 'culturalist' wing (some of the Reformed-evangelicals.)

A VISION FOR FUTURE PCA DIRECTIONS

Peter Jenkins, staunch evangelical Archbishop of Sydney, recently advised a large gathering of evangelical Anglicans in London about how to bring renewal to the church. Nearly all of what he advised is applicable to us. He said a) don't split, b) be political, but in a balanced way, c) make strategic friendships and don't look to your denomination or just your local parish but connect with like-minded in the rest of the world. More fleshed out, the advice is:

1. Don't split off from your current denominational affiliation. Stay and keep the structure from hindering your work through politics that is not too little or too much.

- The only denominations that are not wracked by 'culture wars' are very tiny, (therefore) homogeneous churches that have no impact on society. Those who split off from a larger, more heterogeneous body usually end up later splitting from one another (and thus spending as much time if not more fighting each other in the new connection as the old, rather than ministering to the world.)
- Instead--stay within your connection by: a) Reveling in the historic roots of it, the healthiest expressions of the tradition. b) Doing hard-nosed, smart politics to keep the denominational connection from hindering your mission. "Politics" he defined as "the wise use of power to achieve godly and righteous ends."
- But be careful to strike a balance. If you are too politically dis-engaged, then you may find yourself out on your ear or unable to function. If you are too politically active – and spend big parts of your enemy fighting that 'other party' in the church, you neglect your true calling. It is the *world* we need to be converting.

2. Don't be independent or denominational but build *intra* and *inter* denominational alliances for mission

- Denominational agencies (with several exceptions!) are seldom seen to be all that helpful or cutting edge. Much of the reason *is* 'politics' (they have to be un-offensive to everyone!) Thus the vast majority of churches turn (for discipleship, education, community development, church planting, theological education, music and arts, etc etc etc) to para-church ministries that can draw very widely on Christians across a spectrum.
- But the para-church ministries famously have very little spiritual, moral accountability or doctrinal 'thickness.' To appeal to the widest 'market' there is little particular theological tradition.
- A better (and growing? See Schaller's *From Geography to Affinity*) movement is to intra- and inter-denomination mission alliances, with 'teaching churches' as key components to the network. These are not para-church ministries, accountable only to their own, self-perpetuating boards. These alliances are accountable to a range of churches or even denominations. Also the alliances are not as confessionally 'thin' as para-church ministries, but would share the 'thicker' doctrinal commitments of the sponsoring churches.
- In the future, we should look to our denomination for credentialing and doctrinal and moral discipline, and to its historic tradition as a major component in your congregation's identity. But we should do mission within and across denominational boundaries with churches of similar theological vision and vision for mission.

3. Don't be satisfied any more with only church renewal (taking over older congregations and making them evangelical) and fighting liberalism theologically – in addition, *plant churches!*

- Jenkins lifted up John Stott as a preacher who showed us how to renew and build a church around balanced Bible exposition and ministry. He then lifted up J.I. Packer as a theologian/teacher, who defended inerrancy and Reformed doctrine but in a very accessible, warm, and winsome way. He called them 'apostles' (little 'a'!)
- But he said that the need of this hour was for a new apostle or generation of apostles who would not jettison evangelical essentials but be mission strategists. These would be people who would think out the best strategies for communicating and reaching our culture, and who then will recruit and train workers to execute the strategy, and raise the money for it. Ultimately, he said, the secret to it all is church planting. Whether the strategy components are this or that (i.e. if you want to reach 'post-moderns' or if you want more emphasis on social justice or if you want to propagate expository preachers) the key to it all is new church development. The Charismatics are proving this can be done; i.e., planting churches everywhere that people said they couldn't do it--and often for little or no money-outlay.

In summary, Jenkins called us to stay in the denomination by being political in a minor way, meanwhile developing bold new mission strategies through intra- and inter-denominational alliances, with highest priority given to church planting.

Below are some ideas on how the PCA might fulfill some of these goals suggested by Jenkins (The following are only illustrations – none of them are put forward as proposals.):

- **University ministry.** Identify the 25 universities and/or grad schools that produce the most societal/cultural leaders in the U.S. and put major resources into either a) massively increasing or b) establishing imagination-capturing ministries to those students and grad students. This often will require church planting as well as the establishment of several staffed campus ministries.
- **New models church planting.** Pioneer churches that are: a) Deliberately multi-ethnic, b) arts/culture-friendly and supportive of Christians in 'secular' work, c) wholistic in ministry to their community and to the poor, and d) rabidly, effectively evangelistic.
- **Cultural leadership development.** Virtually all discipleship and religious education tools move a Christian more and more into *church* leadership (to be officers, staff, or ministers.) Let us pioneer the training of Christians in secular vocations for *cultural* leadership--a) encouraging them to penetrate the worlds of business, government, the academy, the media, and the other professions, b) equipping them to work in a distinctively Christian way and c) organizing them to transform the culture in their area of work with the gospel to the degree that they have influence.
- **Multi-ethnic ministry.** Here, form inter-denominational alliances in order to create major Reformed movements of church leaders and church planting among non-Anglo groups, new immigrants, and the urban poor. Encourage the creation of a 'sister synod' of Reformed-

evangelicals (mainly ethnic and often urban) directed by both Anglo and especially non-Anglo young leaders who for various reasons cannot get ordained in the PCA.

- **Community development.** Together mount several bold, extensive, and strategic new ministries to the urban poor.
- **Un-or under-reached key cities.** Washington DC, Boston, and Los Angeles may be especially under-reached by Reformed evangelicals.
- **Global church planting.** Everyone talks about how world-missions is changing, how Christianity has spread in the global South. Are there creative new ways that we can break out of traditional denominational approaches to world missions without simply acting as independent actors and mavericks? Could some PCA churches or even the PCA itself model some new way to go?
- **Cultural change strategy.** Participate as a group in one initiative that aims at long term cultural change. (Reforming liberal arts higher education; reforming the cinema/entertainment world; etc.)
- **Inter-denominational conversation.** Take the initiative to begin discussions with other evangelicals in the Reformed tradition, in this country and around the world, to discuss forming strategic alliances for mission.