

## Presbyterians and Conflict in Historical Perspective

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Presbyterians have been no strangers to theological controversy in recent years. All of you are well aware of these struggles, and my task this afternoon is not to rehash these recent battles, but to put them in the long perspective of history.

We may be tempted to assume that once there was a golden age for the church—a time when Presbyterians presented a common front to the world. We may wistfully hum a line from an old Lerner and Loewe musical and apply it to our church: “Never let it be forgot that once there was a spot called Camelot.”

Have we Presbyterians ever enjoyed an ecclesiastical Camelot? The historical facts testify that we have not. Diversity, dissensions, and sometimes nasty fights and splits have formed an important part of our story since the colonial era.

In part, Presbyterians have experienced conflict because we have tried to combine principles that sometimes grate against one another. More than fifty years ago, historian Lefferts Loetscher in his classic *The Broadening Church* (1954) argued that American Presbyterianism contained two elements: one stressing “precise theological formulation” and “orderly and authoritarian church government,” the other placing “more emphasis upon spontaneity, vital impulse, and adaptability.” “It has been the good fortune and the hardship of the Presbyterian Church,” Loetscher noted wryly, “to have had...these two elements in dialectical tension within itself from the beginning.”<sup>1</sup>

The tension was apparent as American Presbyterians cobbled themselves together first in a presbytery (1706) and then a synod (1716). Initially, these bodies had no official creed, but by the 1720s, some were calling for mandatory subscription to the Westminster Confession. For example, John Thomson, pastor in Lewes, Delaware, asked pointedly: “Now a church without a confession, what is it like?” He replied that such a church was “in a very defenceless condition, as a city without walls” because it had “no bar provided to keep out of the ministry those who are corrupt in doctrinals.” Thomson believed that the danger was more than theoretical. The church found itself “surrounded by so many pernicious and dangerous corruptions in doctrine.... When Arminianism, Socinianism, Deism, Freethinking, &c, do like a deluge overflow even the reformed churches, both established and dissenting,...have we not reason to consult our own safety?” Thomson’s image of the church as a city open to conquest because it had no walls possibly reflected the church’s state in society, as well as the condition of its theology. Surviving church records suggest that sessions, presbyteries, and the synod itself were deeply preoccupied

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<sup>1</sup> Lefferts A. Loetscher, *The Broadening Church: A Study of Theological Issues in the Presbyterian Church since 1869* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1954), 1.

with the establishment of moral order amid the sometimes ill-defined boundaries faced by a young church planting congregations in newly settled regions.<sup>2</sup>

By contrast, Jonathan Dickinson, the New England-born pastor of the Presbyterian church in Elizabethtown, New Jersey, fired off a salvo at the 1722 synod in a sermon investigating “the true boundaries of the church’s power.” He contended that the church could not go beyond Scripture in determining rules for doctrine or discipline. To do so would be “a bold invasion of Christ’s royal power.” When Thomson requested the synod to require subscription several years later, Dickinson stood in opposition, noting pointedly the “glaring contradiction” of requiring ministers to subscribe to a document that itself declared: “God alone is the Lord of the conscience.”<sup>3</sup>

In 1729, the Synod of Philadelphia sent Thomson’s proposal for subscription to committee. The committee was a balanced one, including both Thomson and Dickinson and others of their respective persuasions. The committee’s proposal, enacted by the synod, required ministerial subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith, but it did so with important concessions to those who had opposed this policy. Subsequently known as the Adopting Act, the synod’s policy was an artful blending of two different positions. Since its ambiguities are vital to understanding subsequent Presbyterian history, the act deserves to be quoted at length:

Although the Synod do not claim or pretend to any authority of imposing our faith upon other men’s consciences, but do profess our just dissatisfaction with and abhorrence of such impositions, and do utterly disclaim all legislative power and authority in the church, being willing to receive one another, as Christ has received us to the glory of God, and admit to fellowship in sacred ordinances all such as we have grounds to believe Christ will at last admit to the Kingdom of Heaven; yet we are undoubtedly obliged to take care that the faith once delivered to the saints be kept pure and uncorrupt among us, and so handed down to our posterity. And do therefore agree, that all the ministers of this synod, or that shall hereafter be admitted into this synod, shall declare their agreement in and approbation of the Confession of Faith with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the assembly of divines at Westminster, as being in all the essential and necessary articles, good forms of sound words and systems of Christian doctrine; and do also adopt the said confession and catechisms as the confession of our faith....And in case any minister of this synod or any candidate for the ministry shall have any scruple with respect to an

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<sup>2</sup> Maurice W. Armstrong, Lefferts A. Loetscher, and Charles A. Anderson, eds., *The Presbyterian Enterprise: Sources of American Presbyterian History* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), 28, 29. On colonial Presbyterianism, see Leonard J. Trinterud, *The Forming of an American Tradition: A Re-examination of Colonial Presbyterianism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1949); Marilyn J. Westerlind, *The Triumph of the Laity: Scots-Irish Piety and the Great Awakening, 1625-1760* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Patrick Griffin, *The People with No Name: Ireland’s Ulster Scots, America’s Scots Irish, and the Creation of a British Atlantic World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); and Ned C. Landsman, *Scotland and Its First American Colony, 1683-1765* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> Dickinson is quoted in Bryan F. Le Beau, *Jonathan Dickinson and the Formative Years of American Presbyterianism* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 31, 36.

article or articles of said confession or catechism, he shall at the time of his making said declaration declare his sentiments to the presbytery or synod, who shall notwithstanding admit him to the exercise of the ministry within our bounds and to ministerial communion if the synod or presbytery shall judge his scruple or mistake only to be about articles not essential and necessary in doctrine, worship, or government.<sup>4</sup>

This remarkable document involved considerable equivocation. On the one hand, it echoed the anti-subscriptionists who exalted individual conscience over churchly authority and suggested a circumscribed role for ecclesiastical courts by disclaiming “all legislative power and authority.” On the other, the synod’s Adopting Act asserted that judicatories did have the responsibility to defend “the faith once delivered to the saints.” But what were the articles so basic or essential that everyone had to give assent? The Adopting Act did not say. The determination of the matter was left for church courts to decide on a case-by-case basis.

Already in 1729 one sees principles to which Presbyterianism would repeatedly return over the next several centuries. These included the right of the whole church to set standards of acceptable theology and practice, the necessity of enforcing these standards flexibly on a case-by-case basis, and a commitment to respect *both* individual conscience and the authority of church courts to establish norms of doctrine and polity. Keeping these commitments in a common orbit rather than on a collision course with one another has not always been easy. But after periods of controversy and recrimination, these principles have been ones to which the church recurred when it wished to recover its peace, unity, and purity.

Soon the denomination had a chance to test these principles. In the first round of the test, the church flunked. Questions about revivals, itinerancy of the clergy, and proper church order—issues that the excitement of the Great Awakening brought to fever pitch—produced schism in 1741. The disagreements between the two groups were exceedingly bitter. Gilbert Tennent, in one of the most famous advocates of the Great Awakening within the Presbyterian church, styled opponents of the revival as Pharisees, unconverted men. Lay people unfortunate enough to suffer under the ministry of such ministers should leave them to hear preachers who, their own hearts set right with God, preached a truly evangelical gospel. And if that should grieve the Pharisaic minister, said Tennent, “then he has good cause to grieve over his own rottenness and hypocrisy.” (Obviously, Tennent never read Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People!*)<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Minutes of the Presbyterian Church in America, 1706-1788*, ed. Guy S. Klett (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Historical Society, 1976), 103-04. In this citation and in note 7 below, I have taken the liberty to bring capitalization and spelling in accord with contemporary use.

<sup>5</sup> Selections from Tennent’s sermon, “The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry” may be found in Richard L. Bushman, ed., *The Great Awakening: Documents on the Revival of Religion, 1740-1745* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 87-93; Milton J. Coalter, Jr., *Gilbert Tennent, Son of Thunder: A Case Study of Continental Pietism’s Impact on the First Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986).

This language only succeeded in convincing opponents that people such as Tennent were self-righteous fanatics. Thus, one critic observed that those who called for spiritual renewal had best be careful

lest we lose our charity, while we are seeking for piety; lest, while we look for true conversion, we be deceived by delusion; and lest, while we affect a free and unrestrained preaching of the Gospel, we bring on anarchy and confusion, and overthrow of all order and government.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, in due course passions cooled. When the Synods of Philadelphia and New York came back together in 1758 after these battles, the terms of agreement carefully balanced the powers of church courts against the conscience of minorities. While the majorities could make binding decisions, minorities might legitimately protest these decisions. If conscience did not permit them to concur or even to submit passively, they should “peaceably withdraw...without attempting to make any schism.” Yet, church courts were warned that they should press minorities to this extremity only on matters “the body shall judge indispensable in doctrine or Presbyterian government.” In a word, the right of both the majority to rule and the right of the minority to register conscientious dissent were to be exercised with restraint so that, if at all possible, neither side would push the other to the wall.<sup>7</sup>

The pattern repeated itself in the following century. In 1837, the Presbyterian church again tore itself into rival denominations, Old and New Schools. Once again, the level of hostility was incredibly high. “The necessity for the separation of the parties is urgent,” an Old School newspaper based here in Philadelphia had declared in June 1836. “They do not agree; they cannot agree. We can scarcely conceive of two parties more antagonistic in all the principles of their belief and practice; they receive not the same Gospel; they adopt not the same moral code, and the absence of all mutual affinities must oppose an insuperable barrier to their harmonious union. Truth on one side, error on the other; honesty on one side, artifice on the other....” The struggles were over a variety of issues. Presbyterians disputed the proper interpretation of the Westminster Confession on such matters as the nature of human agency in conversion. They also argued (again!) about the propriety of methods used to promote revivals, this time the so-called “new measures” that included protracted meetings, the use of the anxious bench, colloquial preaching, and allowing women to speak in a public meeting. Also, some felt that what we would call parachurch organizations were usurping the place of proper denominational agencies. Lurking behind these controversies—though often not explicitly named—was the matter of what, if anything, the church should say about the institution of slavery.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Alan Heimert and Perry Miller, eds., *The Great Awakening: Documents Illustrating the Crisis and Its Consequences* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), 126; capitalization brought into conformity with modern use.

<sup>7</sup> *Minutes*, ed. Klett, 341.

<sup>8</sup> “State of the Church,” *The Presbyterian* 6 (June 18, 1836), 2. On the schism of 1837-38, see George M. Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience: A Case Study of Thought and Theology in Nineteenth-Century America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970) 59-87, and James H. Moorhead, “The ‘Restless Spirit of Radicalism’: Old School Fears and the Schism of 1837,” *Journal of Presbyterian History* 78 (Spring 2000): 19-33.

Yet, by the end of the 1860s the rift was healed, at least for the northern segments of the two bodies. (The southern portions of the two separate churches created in 1837 had broken off from their northern counterparts in 1857 and 1861.) The reunion was accomplished on the basis, as it was popularly said at the time, of the Westminster standards “pure and simple”—that is, without effort to define in minute terms what this action meant.<sup>9</sup>

In the 1870s and later, a new set of disputes emerged among Presbyterians about the meaning of their confession and subscription to it. In at least two respects, however, these controversies differed in nature from the preceding ones. First, older conflicts often turned on matters that marked off differences between the Reformed or Presbyterian views from other confessional traditions. However, the new controversies concerned matters that challenged beliefs in many different traditions simultaneously. The so-called higher biblical criticism increasingly won a hearing among many Americans after the 1880s, and with it came a host of questions about the nature and extent of the Bible’s authority. A more self-consciously liberal theology began to emphasize the possibility of growth or change in theology, often gave priority to religious experience in the determination of doctrine, and implied that the essence of true faith was a life lived in a vital relationship with God and not a set of propositions about God. This modernism touted the virtue of self-conscious adaptation of the faith to the spirit of the age, whether measured by humanity’s allegedly improving consciousness or by advances in the sciences. Liberals also tended either to play down the supernatural elements of Christianity or to collapse transcendence into immanence. In such ways, they understood themselves to be making the essence of the Gospel understandable for their age. Their opponents, of course, saw matters differently; and often turned to the Westminster Confession as a way of refuting these liberal beliefs.<sup>10</sup>

In the wake of World War I and in the context of a sense of cultural crisis, some conservatives in the so-called fundamentalist-modernist controversy renewed the struggle to force liberals from the church. Although he was not their chief tactician, J. Gresham Machen, then an assistant professor at Princeton Seminary, was clearly the intellectual leader of this group. Contending in *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923) that modernism or liberalism was an entirely different faith than historic Christianity, Machen insisted that liberals should, in intellectual honesty, withdraw from the Presbyterian church or, failing that outcome, be extruded. For a time it appeared that liberals might indeed be ousted; but events in 1925 changed the dynamics within the denomination. In that year, the General Assembly elected Machen’s Princeton colleague, Charles R. Erdman, as moderator. Although he was deeply conservative theologically, he believed that there was room for greater breadth of views within the denomination than did Machen. Erdman persuaded the assembly to authorize the appointment of a special commission to examine the causes of unrest in the church. The commission’s report, adopted by the assemblies of 1926 and

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<sup>9</sup> Marsden, *Evangelical Mind*, 212-229. Loetscher, *Broadening Church*, 1-8.

<sup>10</sup> In this and the remaining paragraphs, I am heavily influenced by Loetscher, *Broadening Church*; and Bradley J. Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy: Fundamentalists, Modernists, and Moderates* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); and George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

1927, proposed a means for composing the differences. Rejecting the claim that there was widespread departure from the historic faith of the denomination, the commission argued, in effect, that the efforts of previous assemblies to define *a priori* essential articles of the Confession were unconstitutional. The constitution lodged the right of determining what was an essential or necessary article in each presbytery as it, on a case-by-case basis, examined ordinands or received ministers. While the General Assembly had power on an appellate basis to review these decisions, it had no constitutional authority to issue general or blanket statements about what was or was not essential in the confession. In effect, as Lefferts Loetscher argued, the commission proposed theological decentralization as the solution to the controversy, and the denomination largely accepted this solution. Henceforth, at least moderate liberalism would be secure within the Presbyterian church. As for the conservatives, most of them stayed within the denomination, although Machen and something under one per cent of the denomination, after a struggle over an independent board of missions, withdrew in 1936 to form the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.<sup>11</sup>

Motivating the commission decision was something more than a narrow reading of the church's constitution. In the final paragraphs of its report to the assembly, the Special Commission pointed to the fact that the denomination had to find unity because of its great task to serve or influence the world beyond its borders:

If Christianity is not true it should be abandoned. But if it is true, as we know it to be true, without which the world cannot live, then this truth must be carried into every field of human life, into all types of human relationships for the righting of wrong and the achievement of good through the Kingdom of God.... Never was there a clearer or more commanding call that the Church advance in her organized corporate work at home and on foreign fields.... God has given our Church all the equipment she requires for the fulfillment of her task with respect to that purpose. Now let her rise and go forward.<sup>12</sup>

It seems to me that, at our best, we Presbyterians have tried to compose our differences—or at least to find a way to live with them—for precisely this reason. At such moments, we understand that we should not tear ourselves apart or rend the body of Christ, because there is a world out beyond our walls—a world to which we are sent in mission.

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<sup>11</sup> Loetscher, *Broadening Church*, 151; see also D. G. Hart, *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.*, third series, vol. 6., 1927 (Philadelphia: Office of the General Assembly, 1927), 85-86.