All in the Family: Conflict, Disagreement, Division, Schism, and Reconciliation within the American Presbyterian Church

Frederick J. Heuser, PhD, Executive Director, Presbyterian Historical Society

Mark Twain once commented that "You never see Presbyterians ranting, shouting and tearing up the ground. You never heard of a Presbyterian going crazy on religion….You never see any of us Presbyterians getting in a sweat about religion and trying to massacre the neighbors." Presumably to this famous American author, Presbyterians were indeed God's "Frozen Chosen."

Other literary figures also weighed in on Presbyterians. Herman Melville thought Presbyterians were crazy. "Heaven [should] have mercy on us all – Presbyterians and Pagans alike – for we are all somehow dreadfully cracked about the head, and sadly need mending." H.L. Mencken noted that the "great artists of the world are never Presbyterian and seldom respectable. No virtuous man has every painted a picture worth looking at, or written a symphony worth hearing, or a book worth reading." George III called us a "factious people," always finding something to argue about. And of course, there are the comments about how Presbyterians are resistant to change, e.g. how many Presbyterians does it take to change a light bulb theory. A good Episcopalian friend of mine once told me that should she learn that the end of the world is imminent, she will immediately convert to Presbyterianism because it takes longer for things to happen in that denomination than elsewhere.

But perhaps the most interesting caricature of Presbyterians is the one assigned by Henry Van Dyke. He called us "God's silly people." Henry Van Dyke, who was a Presbyterian, applied this term to his fellow Presbyterians for several reasons. First, he opined, "Presbyterians have a propensity to quarrel amongst themselves and divide their forces on minor issues." And

secondly, he suggested, "Presbyterians have an almost incredible indifference to the real significance of their own history." "One of the reasons why our churches have suffered a comparative loss in power and influence," Van Dyke reasoned, "is because our Presbyterian people have failed to…preserve and cherish the heritage of the past and draw courage and inspiration for the present from [the past]." Van Dyke believed that Presbyterians, besides being a contentious people, did not learn very much from their history.

I would suggest two observations: Mark Twain got it wrong and Henry Van Dyke got it right! Twain's observation about the relative placidity of Presbyterians has little basis in reality upon even a cursory glance at our history. Since the Reformation, conflict has been an essential part of the Reformed tradition. Indeed, conflict was at the very heart of the Reformation. Our Presbyterian and Reformed past reflects divisiveness on great moral and theological issues, as well as a variety of lesser issues.

Presbyterians are a discerning people, who seek the will of God through reading the Bible, prayer, and being in communion with each other and other Christians. But the discernment process has meant that Presbyterians have a long history of disagreement, conflict, schism, and reunions. Van Dyke's observation about Presbyterians not learning very much from their own history is a poignant one: he made that statement in 1913 and almost a century later, his comment is still relevant.

The conflict and divisiveness that the PC(USA) experiences today is part of a broader pattern that is deeply rooted in our past. The "flash points" that have produced these conflicts may be different, but the underlying tensions that birthed them are remarkably similar. What is new is that these conflicts and tensions feel new to us. And they feel new to us because we are

trying to understand them outside of any historical framework. In short, we suffer from historical ignorance at the worst or historical amnesia at best.

Since at least the early 1700s, American Presbyterians have disagreed about a variety of issues that continue to surface in new ways with each succeeding generation. Understanding the current version of conflict within the PC(USA) requires some grasp of what has historically divided us as a people of God. I would suggest that there are at least five broad areas that have shaped both past and present disagreements. These would include, in no particular order:

- The role of our confessions and our basic theological beliefs;
- the Bible as the "literal vs. inspired" Word of God;
- our polity as a reflection of our theology;
- Church and State relationships;
- the prophetic witness dilemma.

All are interrelated and interconnected. My own research suggests that since the early 18th century, the Presbyterian family has been divided by well over twenty major conflicts that frequently led to division and schism. Time does not permit elaboration on them all, but a couple of poignant examples will suffice.

After the first Presbyterian Synod was organized in the early 18th century, it took steps to adopt the Westminster Confession of Faith with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms as the theological standard for the denomination. But initially, many Presbyterians feared that strict adherence to a confessional standard would replace the Bible in the life and ministry of the Church. Eventually, a compromise was reached in 1729 that upheld the standard and yet allowed for disagreement in nonessentials.

The conflict over the Westminster standards, though resolved by compromise, set the stage for a more complicated division that ultimately resulted in a schism in 1741. Old Side and New Side Presbyterians found themselves at odds on a variety of issues, including the education of clergy, the role of itinerancy, and the necessity of a conversion experience as a prelude to salvation—all of which were part of a transatlantic, intercontinental revival historians have dubbed the Great Awakening. Compromise was not possible as the two sides were so bitterly divided that each organized their own respective Synod. The schism lasted until 1758 when both Old and New Side Synods reconciled and reunited.

Over the next century, Presbyterians found themselves at odds with each other over church and state issues, theological differences, moral issues, and ecumenical agreements and partnerships. Many of these issues, along with those that produced the first schism a century earlier, resulted in another division in the 1830s. Old School Presbyterians and their New School counterparts went their separate ways in 1838 because their differences were simply irreconcilable. Historian James Moorhead cited the following which appeared in a Philadelphia newspaper in 1836:

> *The necessity for the separation of the parties is urgent. 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.*

At the 1838 General Assembly, the Old School Presbyterians expelled the New School adherents and for more than three decades, the two remained apart. In 1869, the two sides reunited when those "irreconcilable differences" were reconciled.

The reunion of Old and New School Presbyterians did not mean an end to conflict within the Presbyterian family. By the end of the 19th century, Presbyterians disagreed about Darwinism, the higher criticism of Scripture, the Social Gospel, segregation, and cooperation with ecumenical partners. Issues of inclusivity such as the role of women and how to minister to Native Americans and newly arrived immigrants continued to produce conflict. By the dawn of the 20th century, disagreements about what constituted Presbyterian "Fundamentals," what hymns Presbyterians should sing, and issues of war and peace were major "flash points" for conflict. All or most of these issues arose over differences in how Presbyterians read and interpreted Scripture.

We have frequently heard references to the words "Biblical Standards." The 19th and 20th centuries are replete with examples of Presbyterians adhering to biblical standards or not. For instance, the whole argument over Darwinism was really about the creation story and the accuracy of that biblical account. At the end of the 19th century, the heresy trial of Charles Briggs over the "higher criticism" arguments that were reshaping theological scholarship reflects the essence of those who believed in the literal vs. inspired role of the Bible. In the early 20th century, conservative Presbyterians attempted to redefine the faith in light of this new scholarship. In 1910, a new publication entitled *The Fundamentals* was created and distributed to millions of Presbyterians. The concern was that the faith was becoming too liberal and that those Fundamentals of Christianity needed to be asserted.

The "roar" of the 1920s unleashed tensions that had emerged at the turn of the century over whether Presbyterians should subscribe to a set of fundamentals or not. But the disagreement over standards predates the early 20th century and certainly was evident in the conflict over the Westminster Standards that emerged at the birth of the American Presbyterian

Church. In the 1920s and 1930s, conflicts over theology and ecclesiology between progressive, moderate, conservative, orthodox, and fundamentalist Presbyterians in some ways echoed back to Old Side/New Side and Old School/New School divisions and the disagreements that surfaced after the American Civil War. The split that occurred as a result of what has been called the "Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy" was driven by protagonists who sought, in the words of Professor Bradley Longfield, "to preserve the influence of Christianity in a dramatically changed and radically changing world," a world that was "steadily moving away from distinctively Christian influences" – in other words, between those who felt the church had to be responsive to the changes in the broader culture and those who did not. This schism, in my opinion, was not between liberals and conservatives. Rather, it was a contest for the soul of the church between those who believed in a rigid orthodoxy and those who did not. And in that struggle, those who believed that the Presbyterian tent should be a broad one won out.

For the last six decades, American Presbyterians have confronted a myriad of contemporary issues that have challenged the peace, unity, and harmony of the church. From the advent of the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, to the student unrest that exploded on many college campuses in the 1960s and 1970s, to issues during the last two decades dealing with abortion, the ordination of women, human sexuality, "Re-imagining God," and a host of other volatile issues, Presbyterians have sought to be faithful to the Gospel in their understanding of these difficult issues. Throughout, varying interpretations have been a defining characteristic of what it means to be a Presbyterian.

So where does the current struggle fit into the broader historical framework? In many ways, it builds upon existing differences and tensions that have been with us since the beginning. It is the sum total of who we have been as Presbyterians. Let me suggest some examples:

The New Form of Government

Presbyterians seldom act quickly and the prolonged discussions over whether to adopt what became known as nFOG resulted from many, many years of discussion about the adequacy of the Book of Order. In many ways, disagreements over nFOG reflected the "order vs. ardor" dynamic that has been part of the Presbyterian ethos from the beginning. The desire for a more simplified constitution reflected, in my opinion, an increasing dislike of what was perceived as a "regulatory model of governance." That model evolved starting in the late 19th century and developed as the church accelerated its embrace of the prophetic witness model that was stimulated by the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. But the concern for justice stood next to our need for order—and hence, the old Book of Order reflected two themes: the ardor and passion for justice and the desire for order, efficiency, detail and simply getting it right. The recent change to our previous form of government reflected a changing ethos in society and the church at large—and it did not happen quickly. The prolonged dialogue about whether to adopt nFOG or not reflected the desire for more flexibility in a rapidly changing global landscape vs. the tried and true regulatory approach that had worked for years. It is a classic example, like the differences between Old School and New School Presbyterians, about how Presbyterians view the church in a changing world. Fortunately, we did not go to war over the constitution or resort to massacring our neighbors

The Change in Ordination Standards/Language

The issue of human sexuality that has divided us since the late 1970s also reflects older tensions and disagreements—not about sexuality, but inclusivity, justice, our theology, and how we interpret scripture. But the flash point has been sexuality; in this case same-sex relationships

and how LGBT folks related to and interacted with both the broader culture and the church. Certainly, the debate over what is biblical and what is not was an essential part of this issue. But equally as important is what many perceived to be the justice issue and whether or not the current PC(USA) was going to embrace inclusivity. Since the 1920s and the debates between Fundamentalists and Modernists, the issue has been whether the PCUSA would be an inclusive, big tent church or one with a more narrow focus. The decision in the 1920s and 1930s was for the former and the change in the ordination language is consistent with that focus.

Decreasing Connectionalism

We have all heard the term "creeping congregationalism," and I believe this concept is altering our own understanding of our Presbyterian polity and identity. Though we continue to talk about our connectionalism as an important part of our polity, truth be told is that we are less connected to each other. Technology allows us to be "connected" 24/7 but that is not what I am talking about. It is the theological and emotional connectionalism that has weakened. We are in some ways more isolated from each other than we have ever been in the past. Some large churches feel no need to be part of life outside of their fortressed ways. Small congregations are suspicious of governing bodies above the session. In short, we are less connected because we lack trust in each other. This unfortunately, I suspect, is endemic to our world and the church has been impacted by it like secular institutions.

After the split – what's next? Some observations and lessons for today

So assuming that a number of churches decide to leave for ECO, the EPC or whatever, what happens next? Splits are never pleasant—and historically, Presbyterians have handled each

differently. But since the beginning, churches have left the fold on a regular basis, sometimes stimulated by great moral or theological issues, sometimes by less significant ones. The body of Christ has always been broken despite our quest for unity. How have we dealt with that? Here are a few examples.

- Old Side/New Side and Old School/New School: in both cases, the Old Side/Old School adherents expelled their New Side/New School counterparts. It was messy but it did not preclude reconciliation and reunion a generation later.
- PCUSA and PCCSA (PCUS): It took a Civil War to break up the PCUSA and even at the war's end, the former Confederate Church chose to remain a separate church. There were numerous efforts prior to 1983 to reunite, but old tensions and feelings prevailed and it took a century to reconcile and reunite. Some of those tensions are still evident today.
- Fundamentalist-Modernist Split: Our polity and an inclusive theology prevailed in this one, with Machen et al "defrocked" because of their actions. A relatively small number of PCUSA churches left—this was not a "conservative vs. liberal" scenario. It was more of an Orthodox and Fundamentalist vs. everybody else dynamic. Reconciliation has never occurred and reunion is unlikely. I will say more about this one later on as I believe it has great relevance for today.
- PCUS vs. PCA split: Issues of race and the role of women accounted for this split in the 1970s, along with the concern that the PCUS had become "too liberal." In some ways, this was a continuation of the 1930s differences but within a region of the country. A relatively small number of Presbyterian churches left—probably only a third of what was projected.

- EPC and UPCUSA/PCUS split in 1980-1981: The impetus for the creation of the EPC was the perceived liberalism in both the northern and southern branches of the two largest Presbyterian denominations, the UPCUSA and the PCUS. Existing theological differences and inclusivity have precluded reconciliation. A relatively small number of churches left.

Sometimes Presbyterians can disagree agreeably. Amiable separations are always desirable and the fact that numerous presbyteries have adopted "gracious separation" policies is a wise, prudent, and caring approach. Gracious separations help to lower the tensions that have developed, and they also make possible but do not guarantee reconciliations and reunions. For example, though we frequently think about that which divides us, remember that the historical record also suggests there have been reunions as well. For example:

- The Old Side/New Side split healed in 1758 after many of the differences disappeared and after some of the protagonists from the Old Side went to their heavenly reward.
- The Old School and New School reconciled in 1869 in a similar way.
- The division between the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (Covenanters) and the Associate Presbyterian Church (Seceders) healed when the two merged to form the UPCNA in 1858.
- The split with the Cumberland Presbyterian Church that occurred in the early 19th century was partially healed in 1906 with a reunion.
- After many years of discussion, a union between the PCUSA and the Welsh-Calvinistic Methodist Church occurred in 1920.
- In 1958, the PCUSA and the UPCNA united to form the UPCUSA.

- The split between the PCUSA and its southern members healed in 1983, in the wake of bloody war, theological differences, and cultural differences.

These are examples of denominational mergers. But keep in mind that presbyteries, synods, and very frequently congregations have merged and or reconciled over the course of the last 300 years. Presbyterians and their churches have left and later rejoined the fold.

I began my presentation with comments by Mark Twain about the placidity of Presbyterians and I hope that I have communicated that our history together as a covenant community has been a journey that has been marked by division, conflict, and schism as well as reconciliation and reunion.

I end with the story of a Presbyterian family who in many ways reflect that journey. In 1936, the Presbytery of Philadelphia removed Edwin H. Rian from the ministry because of his role in helping to found the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Eleven years later, Rian asked to be reinstated and the Committee on Candidates and Credentials of the Presbytery of Philadelphia recommended that he be restored. In Rian's own words, he attested that:

> *I am now firmly convinced that the formation of the IBPFM [Independent Board of Presbyterian Foreign Missions] and the separatist movement that fostered it was wrong, because it disrupted the unity of the Church of Jesus Christ….I am now certain that it was wrong to form the separatist movement in 1938 and to proclaim the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. as apostate. My eleven years of association with that separatist movement have only confirmed the teaching of the scriptures on the visible church and the mistake of withdrawing from one of its true, visible branches.*

Ironically, Rian's experience was not unique. While the thought of separating from an "apostate church" in the mid-1930s proved enticing to many conservative Presbyterians, the dream of living in a "true Presbyterian Church" proved elusive. After the organization of the OPC, with the threat of liberalism now gone, the conservative Presbyterians in the OPC could not refrain from controversy. A year after its founding, Carl McIntire led a smaller group of conservatives in the formation of the Bible Presbyterian Church. Throughout the 1940s, the new denomination lost members and ministers to other communions, thanks to internal disputes over denominational relations with non-Presbyterians. While they may have been able to escape the theological breadth that characterized the PCUSA, they could not escape the pattern of controversies that have troubled American Presbyterians since the 18th century. In short, they were unable to achieve a consensus of what it means to be a Presbyterian.

More than fifty years after Edwin Rian was reinstated, another member of the Rian family theorized about why she was a member of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Abigail Rian Evans, daughter of Edwin Rian, was born into the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, participated in the UPCUSA in high school, served as a missionary under the Brazilian Presbyterian Church, was a synod executive in the PCUS and after reunion, the PC(USA). In 2001, she made a presentation at Princeton Theological Seminary on the theme, "Why I Am A Presbyterian?" "I am a Presbyterian," she explained, because:

- *Scripture is central; interpretation varies greatly*
- *Grace and not Works is emphasized*
- *Dissent and Debate are allowed*
- *Diversity of congregations is embraced*
- *Theology is applied to the Public Arena*

- *A Democratic form of Government is practiced.*

In conclusion, she noted, "as important as all of these reasons are, the overriding, pre-eminent reason why I am a Presbyterian is the teaching of God's grace as revealed in Jesus Christ. I could never have passed through the trials and tribulations and struggles of my life without being carried in God's arms and living in a state of forgiveness. Why am I a Presbyterian? Because God preordained it to be so," she concluded.

Perhaps like her father many years before, Abigail Rian Evans realized that God's grace and the love and example of Jesus Christ have more to do with building up the body of Christ than the self-inflicted wounds that produce the fractures, fissures , divisions, and schisms that have defined Presbyterians since the beginning.