WHAT'S SO GREAT ABOUT THE PCA

Tim Keller
June, 2010

My first General Assembly was the PCA's third, held in Jackson, Mississippi just under thirty-five years ago. Ever since then, I've seen a lot of conflict in our communion. My friends in other denominations ask, 'isn't there something inherently wrong with a denomination that is filled with such tensions?' Now church fights are always fueled in part by ego and spiritual immaturity, and we must all share responsibility for that. But I propose that these struggles are also a sign of something good, even uniquely good, about our denomination. I believe our conflicts lie in that we are one of the few Presbyterian denominations that hasn't pruned off one or more of its historic branches.

Within the Reformed churches, there has always been a tension between what George Marsden calls 'the Reformed branches'--the doctrinalist, pietistic and culturalist impulses.[1] (Please read this footnote.) To understand the PCA today, we must trace out the history of these branches in American Presbyterianism.

Spiritual revival and the 'sides' of Presbyterianism

Reformed Christianity puts a high value on the objective—on theological soundness and creedal subscription. But it has also historically given a lot of attention to the subjective. Reformed soteriology holds that salvation is not a human product—it is God's work. This emphasis has drawn attention to the topic of spiritual experience.[2] If regeneration

---

[1] I am going to use George Marsden's terminology to describe the Reformed Branches, even though they are rather bland, and each on is bit negative. Doctrinalists prefer to call themselves 'confessionalists' and pietists would rather talk about 'renewal' and the reformists or culturalists would perhaps prefer to call themselves 'kingdom' people. But in each case the other parties can rightly object that *they* believe in the confession or in spiritual renewal or in the kingdom as well, and they dislike the implication that they do not. Often the names we choose for ourselves are self-aggrandizing while insinuating negative things about any who differ with us. My roots are in what here is called the 'pietist' or 'revivalist' wing. I wince at those terms, and would prefer a more noble name, but for the sake of fairness and utility I will use Marsden's phraseology which is mildly insulting to everyone(!) See his essay," Introduction: Reformed and American," in *Reformed Theology in America* [ed. David F. Wells; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997]

[2] As long as you believe (as Reformed Christians do) that regeneration and saving faith is wholly the work of God, it is inevitable that the revivalist question will keep coming up: "Many in Israel were circumcised in flesh but not circumcised in heart! Even though Nicodemus was in the covenant community, Jesus asked him if he was born again. So yes, you are in the church and

1

is strictly God's work, it is only natural to ask how we can distinguish true, God-generated spiritual experience from the spurious.

The Puritans attended to this subject in massive detail. A great deal of energy was given to distinguishing false professors of Christianity from those with true experience. Thomas Shepherd's *The Parable of the Ten Virgins* and John Flavel's *The Touchstone of Sincerity* were examples of such works, and both were quoted extensively by Jonathan Edwards in his *Religious Affections.*[3] Many of the interests of 17th century Puritans led on directly to the emphases of 18th century revivalism. In America the European state church-establishment and parish system was not adopted. In that older system the great majority of people in a society were literally born into their churches and grew up in them. In the more democratic ethos of America, churches had to reach out to individuals and call them to conversion through a personal decision. Reformed theology, especially of the Puritan variety, gave revivalist American preachers resources to help listeners examine their hearts, become convicted of sin, and seek true conversion.

During the 18th century in the U.S., the doctrinalist and pietist (or revivalist) impulses within the Reformed church split the church . The doctrinalists were called 'Old Side' and they took a dim view of revivals. They stressed the creeds and the 'great objectivities' of salvation, rather than a conscious conversion experience. Their ministries were based on the long, communal process of admission to sealing ordinances and catechesis. The pietists were called the 'New Side' and they emphasized the importance of 'experimental acquaintance' of the gospel. Their ministries were based more on crises, turning points, and voluntary societies. The revivalists emphasized innovative ways to evangelize individuals through measures like field preaching, outdoor meetings, and societies meeting in homes for 'follow up' of converts. For doctrinalists, one became a Christian by identifying with and entering the church. For them, the moment of conversion was the moment one became a Christian.

Each side developed long-standing critiques of the other side that still resonate today. Doctrinalists felt that the pietists were too individualistic and subjective in their emphases. They felt revivalism led people to trust in their often ephemeral and passing feelings, and they felt many of the 'conversions' of the revivals were merely emotional experiences that would pass away. The revivals also weakened people's connection to

you take the sacraments, but do you know that God has done a saving work in your heart?" That's the revivalist question. Reformed theology will always produce people who keep posing this question in their preaching.

[3] See Peter J. Thuesen, ed. *Catalogues of Books,* volume 26 in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (Yale, 2008) pp. 442, 460.

the institutional church. New Siders, however, felt Old Side churches contained many nominal believers who still needed to be converted. They were afraid of dead orthodoxy and a lack of evangelistic fervor. Old Siders felt many New Siders were pragmatists, and New Siders saw many Old Siders were legalists. History provides much evidence that both critiques were largely right.

Something of a compromise between these two branches happened in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. From 1741 to 1758 the Presbyterian Church existed as two denominations—the traditional and the revivalist. The Reunion of 1758 brought the two branches back together. The Old Side insisted on confessional subscription and church authority, and they got what they wanted. But, as part of the compromise, the piety of the revivals was largely embraced. The new Presbyterianism required that ministers demonstrate 'experimental piety' and that members be people who give evidence of a conversion experience. Leaders such as Archibald Alexander and Charles Hodge of Princeton Seminary articulated this Old Side/New Side synthesis in their writing and ministry.

Both of these approaches, the doctrinalist and the pietist, have chafed against one other over the years. Nevertheless, they both grow out of commonly held Reformed theology. That is why, whenever there has been a church split over such issues, and the doctrinalists have run off the pietists or vica versa, the pruned off branch often grows back within the new, more 'pure' denomination. Why? Both impulses come from the theology itself.

Social reform and the 'schools' of Presbyterianism

George Marsden argues that a 'culturalist' impulse—the desire to reform the structures of society—has been present in the Reformed churches in North America from the beginning. He writes:

> "Until [the nineteenth century] almost all the Reformed groups seem to have been working on the basis of a vaguely formulated, but deeply entrenched, tradition that….assumed that being Reformed accordingly involved transforming the moral ethos and legal system of a people [nation] so that it would comport with God's law."[4]

---

[4] Marsden, p.6.

The culturalist impulse in the Old World

This consensus came with the Reformed churches from Europe. As Ernst Troeltsch wrote in his classic *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches,* Calvinism led

> "everywhere to…a systematic endeavor to mold the life of Society as a whole….it lays down the principle that the Church ought to be interested in all sides of life, and it neither isolates the religious element over against the other elements, like Lutheranism, nor does it permit this sense of collective responsibility to express itself merely in particular institutions and occasional interventions in affairs, as in Catholicism." [5]

In Europe, Reformed Christians had been the most 'world-formative' of all Protestants. Anabaptist Protestants did not believe Christians should seek to reform culture at all, but should instead be only a 'model moral subcommunity' within a corrupt social order.

Lutherans and Calvinists both agreed that the church should *not* seek to directly control or reform the state, yet they believed that Christians *should* be involved as individuals in society for its betterment. This has been called the concept of the 'two kingdoms', and both Luther and Calvin held to it in some form (see *Institutes* 3.19.15.) Christian magistrates and citizens should work as individuals for the good in society, while Christian pastors and members should minister the Word, Sacraments, and discipline within the church.

Nevertheless, as Troeltsch wrote, Calvinists put more emphasis on Christian involvement in society and on engagement with culture than did Lutherans. For example, Luther believed that it was the civil magistrate's job to care for the poor of the town, and not the job of the church. Calvin, however, believed it was the job of the diaconate of the churches to do so as much as possible to care for the poor of the city. In Geneva Calvin saw diaconal work with the poor and general education to be part of the work of the church and a means of reforming society.[6] Calvin saw his role as not only building up the church in Geneva, but also reforming the very culture of the whole city.

---

[5] Quoted in Nicholas Wolterstorff, in *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Eerdmans, 1983) p.4.

[6] See Elsie McKee, *Diakonia in the Classical Reformed Tradition and Today* (Eerdmans, 1989) p.17- "Lutherans, Zwinglian Reformed, and most Anglicans concluded that the ecclesiastical is concerned only with the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. The civil…[was] responsible for all the other practical, administrative affairs….For Reformed leaders like…Calvin…the role of the ecclesiastical included…relief of the poor and education. Thus…. Calvinists assign[ed] a greater number of roles to the ecclesiastical ministry." See also G.W.H. "Diakonia in the Early Church" in James I. McCord, ed. *Service In Christ* (Eerdmans, 1966.)

This 'cultural impulse' of Reformed Christianity came to America, but soon the question posed itself--in such a pluralistic and democratic situation, how much emphasis should Reformed churches now put on reforming a society it could not control? Marsden says it was the issue of slavery that threw this question into sharpest relief. In the North, many Reformed churches were moderately anti-slavery. Indeed the Reformed Presbyterian Church, General Synod (which later merged into the Reformed Presbyterian Church and subsequently into the PCA in 1982) was one of the first U.S. denominations to not allow members to be slave-holders.[7] But Presbyterian churches in the South strongly opposed any interference in the institution of slavery. They developed the idea of the 'spirituality of the church' in which the church's role was not to speak to political issues but only to evangelize, catechize, and build up the church.

This was, of course, an intensified form of the more Lutheran version of the two-kingdoms doctrine, but certainly a departure from the way the Reformed churches of Scotland and the Netherlands had related to society. Nevertheless, this emphasis led many doctrinalist churches in the South to shed the older Reformed culturalist impulse. Meanwhile, many other Reformed churches in the North sought to address the new American situation by marrying the pietist impulse to the older cultural-reformist impulse. It was argued that, though in America no church would have a 'state-church' as in had in Europe, social reform could take place if enough of the populace converted. Then reforming legal structures (like abolishing slavery) would happen democratically.

The Old School and the New School

And so, as division over the 'pietist' impulse led to the 'Sides' of the 18th century, division over the 'culturalist' impulse led to the Old School and New School Presbyterianism in the 19th century. "Old School" Presbyterianism consisted of doctrinalist churches that were more negative about any social reform agenda. The Old School dominated in the South but also was influential in the North through Princeton Seminary.[8] Meanwhile "New School" Presbyterianism was a merger of strong pietists with the culturalist impulse for social reform.[9] New School Presbyterianism was marked by 1) a very strong sense of responsibility for the reform of society and for deep

---

[7] http://www.pcahistory.org/findingaids/rpces/history/03.pdf .

[8] We should remember, however, that the Princeton Old School was not identical to the "Old Side" of the 18th century. It was it was a marriage of the doctrinalist impulse with some of the New Side pietism. So Old School Presbyterianism was heavily doctrinalist and partly pietist, while New School Presbyterianism was heavily culturalist and strongly pietist. The influences of the three impulses on any particular Presbyterian body are always mixed and complicated.

[9] Marsden, p.6.

engagement in national politics, 2) vigorous use of ecumenical evangelical voluntary societies (para-church organizations) for mission rather than agencies under the control of church courts, and 3) emphasis on the 'religion of the heart' over doctrinal precision. This attracted the pietists, who, though holding to Reformed doctrinal distinctives, always put more emphasis on 'core evangelical doctrines' like the new birth. The Old School Presbyterians expelled the New School in 1838, and so again Presbyterians existed as two denominations. In the North, the Old School and New School re-united in 1869, to a great degree because many of the Old Schoolers perceived the New School to be growing more orthodox in their doctrine.[10]

However, both Old School and New School Presbyterianism were confronted in the late 19th and early 20th century by modernism, in the two forms of higher criticism of the Bible and of naturalistic science and Darwinism. Doctrinalist churches rejected modernism almost completely, but many in the New School were open to it. It fit in with the culturalist emphasis on innovation and adaptation to social realities. Theological liberalism in the New School grew into the social gospel movement.[11] But as the New School moved away not only from the compliance to strict church order that the doctrinalists prized, but also from the 'core' evangelical doctrines such as personal salvation through substitutionary atonement, the revivalists became alarmed and began to leave the increasingly liberal culturalist denominations.

The Old School party, centered first at Princeton Theological Seminary and after 1929 at Westminster Seminary under J.Gresham Machen, had the most intellectual fire-power to defend orthodox Christianity against modernism. In the early 1930s, there was a time in which New School pietist Presbyterians at institutions like Wheaton College and Moody Bible Institute began to come together with Old School leaders into a single new church, but things began to break apart after Machen's death in 1937. New School evangelicalism of a more separatist brand was led by Carl McIntire and became the Bible Presbyterian Church. So by mid-20th century, the 'culturalist' impulse of Presbyterianism seemed to have been wholly captured by the liberal, mainline Reformed churches. Conservative Presbyterians were all either doctrinalist or pietist—not culturalist.

---

[10] Under the influence of Charles Finney, many New Schoolers earlier in the century had moved away from traditional Reformed views such as total depravity and the imputation of Adam's sin. But some perceived a movement back toward Reformed soteriology after the Civil War. If there was any such 'move' it was short-lived.

[11] Marsden, p.8.

The re-birth of the orthodox culturalist impulse

On the other hand, less separatist Reformed evangelical ministers helped form the 'new evangelicalism' after World War II, including the National Association of Evangelicals, *Christianity Today*, and Fuller Seminary. Led by Harold Ockenga (a member of Westminster Seminary's first graduating class in 1929), Carl F.H.Henry and others, there was a Reformed cast to this evangelicalism, and most of the founders of Fuller Seminary had ties to Machen, but the ethos was definitely New School with its emphasis on cross-denominational unity, pragmatism, and para-church agencies, such as Inter-Varsity, Campus Crusade, and Young Life (all of which had many leaders who were evangelical Presbyterians.)

By the mid-20th century, this Reformed evangelicalism re-ignited a culturalist impulse that was not theologically liberal. Carl Henry wrote *Remaking the Modern Mind* (1946) and *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (1947) calling for evangelicals to re-engage culture and work for social reform. Though a Baptist, Henry dedicated the first book to Gordon Clark, William Harry Jellema (of Calvin College) and Cornelius Van Til of Westminster Seminary. Another important writer in this vein was Francis Schaeffer, who had been the first minister ordained in the new Bible Presbyterian church. But during his ministry in Switzerland at L'Abri, Schaeffer began moving in a less separatist and more 'culturalist' direction. Meanwhile, the ethnic Dutch-American churches such as the Christian Reformed had kept a very strong version of the older Reformed culturalist impulse. From Schaeffer, continental Reformed sources and others, the idea of doing business, art, and politics 'out of a Christian world-and-life view' became widespread in American evangelicalism. This general approach to 'world-view' has strongly Reformed roots.[12]

Marsden notes many ironies about the Reformed 'culturalist' impulse. While the Old School in the South ostensibly held to an apolitical stance- 'the spirituality of the church'--in reality it became a strong defender of the Southern way of life.[13] In other words, to say (in a 'Two-Kingdom' way) 'I'm against social reform, I just want to preach the gospel' is to be *de facto* supportive of the cultural status quo, and therefore to be a

---

[12] See Joel Carpenter, "The Perils of Prosperity: Neo-Calvinism and the Future of Religious Colleges", a paper given at the conference "The Future of Religious Colleges" held at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 0ct 6-7, 2000. In this paper Carpenter traces out why the belief in world-and-life views, in 'no neutrality' in rational thought, and other Reformed concepts have essentially triumphed in evangelical Christian higher education, reigning even in colleges without Reformed roots.

[13] Marsden, p.7.

cultural conservative. "Spirituality of the Church" proponents like Thornwell and Dabney ended up as *de facto* supporters of slavery, and so they were culturally engaged after all.

Though the 'culturalist' impulse in Reformed Christianity is very alive and well, it takes several opposing forms. Many orthodox Reformed people (especially in those with roots in Southern Presbyterianism) are socially active as part of politically conservative movements, and therefore have become part of the Christian Right. On the other hand, many orthodox Reformed people with roots in Dutch Calvinism tend to be politically liberal. Then there are those who have followed Rousas Rushdoony, a politically conservative Dooyeweerdian thinker who contributed to the 'theonomist' movement.[14] Some thinkers in the 'Federal Vision' movement seem to have drawn from both Southern Presbyterian conservatism and the earlier 'theonomic' movement.

So it is not surprising that tensions develop between doctrinalists, pietists, and culturalists. Indeed, Reformed culturalists are themselves deeply divided over what *kind* of culture and reforms we should be seeking. Many doctrinalists and pietists worry that emphases on 'cultural engagement' and social concern distract Christians from ministering the Word and Sacraments, and they point out how often these emphases have historically accompanied doctrinal decline. The cultural reformers, on the other hand, worry about sectarianism, dualism, and a simple lack of love for neighbor. They point out that in the past, an unwillingness to 'engage culture' led many Old School churches to support the horrendous social institution of slavery. Again, history gives much evidence that both critiques are right. And again, it is important to keep in mind that when a church tries to expel its culturalist, the branch begins to grow back over time. Why? It comes from the world-formative nature of Reformed theology itself.

The best systematic theologies (here I'm thinking particularly of Herman Bavinck's) are conscious of how the doctrinalist, pietist, and culturalist impulses all grow out of the same basic Reformed theological soil. The richness of Reformed theology inevitably inspires vigorous evangelism <u>and</u> sound doctrine; subjective spiritual experience <u>and</u> the 'great objectivities' of the sacraments; building the church <u>and</u> serving in society; creative cultural engagement <u>and</u> rootedness in historic tradition. In actual practice, however, these emphases are very difficult to combine in a local church and even more difficult to maintain together in a denomination. The proponents of each kind ministry tend to grate on each other and mistrust each other. And yet Presbyterianism continually produces them all.

---

[14] Marsden, p.10.

The PCA and its branches

Against this backdrop, how do we understand the PCA?

What do the branches look like today?

As I've sought to point out, the three 'branches' or 'impulses' seldom appear in pure form. Nevertheless, we can make some general statements about each approach so we can discern their influences on us.

The doctrinalist impulse puts the emphasis on the corporate and the objective. The stress is on ministry done through church courts—Session, Presbytery, and General Assembly-- and on people being brought to Christ through objective ordinances and processes like baptism and catechism. It takes a dim view of most para-church agencies and inter-denominational cooperation. There is more stress on uniformity of faith and practice than on freedom and diversity. Historic tradition is valued over innovation, and social adaptation is looked upon with great suspicion. These last two factors mean there is less freedom for individual Christians and local Sessions. Things are more tightly regulated.

The pietist impulse puts the emphasis on the individual and the experiential. Pietists do ministry through church courts, but they are also supportive of ministry through para-church ministries. Pietists stress core doctrines over secondary ones, and feel more like part of the broader evangelical movement than do doctrinalists. This branch, like the doctrinalists, are generally suspicious of an emphasis on social justice and cultural engagement. While the doctrinalists fear cultural accommodation, the pietists are more afraid that it will detract from the pietists' main concern—evangelism, mission, and church growth.

The culturalist impulse is like the doctrinalist in that it values theological reasoning and is suspicious of the individualism and pragmatism of the pietists. Culturalists emphasize community and the corporate in ways similar to the doctrinalists. However, culturalists are more like the pietists in their openness to social adaptation. Indeed, they usually are <u>more</u> open to the 'new' than the pietists. And the culturalists pay the most attention to what goes on outside the church in the culture. In particular, they usually give more heed to modern scholarship. Culturalists may show less concern with 'church growth' and overt evangelistic programs than either of the other two branches. Also feel more affinity to 'the Great Tradition'—the Anglican, Catholic, and Eastern churches—than do the doctrinalists and the pietists.

The PCA has all the branches

It is not surprising that the PCA contains all the Reformed branches. The original body of PCA churches came out of the Southern Presbyterian church, a mixture of Old School <u>and</u> revivalism.[15] In 1982 the PCA merged with the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod, which itself was the product of a union between the 'New Light' (New Side) Reformed Presbyterian Church, General Synod, and parts of the Bible Presbyterian church (the pietistic New School). In addition, many evangelical congregations that had lived within the mainline Presbyterian churches, both north and south, left as individual churches and joined the PCA. In short, the PCA has been formed with churches and leaders from many different branches—Old School, Old Side, New School.

One way to see how present all the 'branches' are in the PCA is to ask a minister-- 'When you get most tired of the PCA--where else would you consider going to minister?' Some will say the OPC, some will say the EPC, and some will say the CRC or RCA. That is extremely telling, I think, and here's why.

The Orthodox Presbyterian Church has been an Old Side, Old School communion almost from the start. However, in the late 20th century it grew a 'New Side' branch with the New Life movement of Jack Miller. Most of those churches left, however, and came into the PCA. The Evangelical Presbyterian Church is a definite New School denomination, even though it has an Old School group within it. The EPC allows a similar range of doctrinal positions to that of the mid-19th century New School, and there are many who are not completely Reformed in their soteriology. Its judicatories allow great freedom to local churches but provide little theological unity. The Christian Reformed church is a continental Reformed body with an emphasis on doctrine and cultural transformation, but it never went through a revivalist phase, and perhaps as a result it has always struggled in the area of church planting and evangelism. The Reformed Church in America is even more New Schoolish, in that it has a strong evangelical wing as well as a liberal wing. That we have some PCA ministers who would fit happily into each of these denominations, each one of which is, respectively, more doctrinalist, more pietist, and more reformist than the PCA--is very telling. It reveals that *all* the historic branches of Presbyterianism are alive and very well and living in the PCA.

---

[15] One of the founding organizations of the PCA was Presbyterian Evangelistic Fellowship, which consisted of many full-time traveling evangelists that held revival meetings in local congregations.

So the PCA has fair representation of all the historic branches of Presbyterianism. There are some Old Siders, a lot of classic 'Princeton' Old Schoolers, a lot of conservative New Schoolers, and some interesting combinations. Consider the Federal Vision, which is (to my mind) doctrinalist and (conservative) culturalist, combined with a strong anti-pietism. Most strongly opposed to them is the Old Side (doctrinalist, very anti-pietist, very anti-culturalist) approach of Westminster, California. Also, in the last two decades, a social reformist branch has grown up that combines the 'high church' emphases of Reformed thinkers of the Mercersburg School (essentially Old Side in its communal sensibilities) with the social justice impulses of the New England revivalists. Despite a similar commitment to church tradition and the sacraments, its members are more politically liberal than those sympathetic to the Federal Vision.

How did the PCA get so diverse?

Recently Sean Lucas has written that most of the founders of the PCA designed the denomination to be broader than Old School Southern Presbyterianism from the very start. Though some key founding figures like Morton Smith wished the PCA to be uniformly Old School in the tradition of Thornwell and Dabney, this was never the case. From the beginning it was hoped that the PCA could "accommodate a range of personalities and perspectives".[16] Why? It was because a dominant number of the PCA's founders were animated by two concerns. First, many were revivalists in the tradition of the original New Siders. They felt a bond with non-Presbyterian evangelicals, enjoyed working through non-denominational para-church agencies, and sought more freedom for local congregations so they could be adaptive and innovative in their local settings. But secondly, many of the founders wanted the PCA to be a *conservative* 'mainline' church—that is, they wanted to unite conservatives of many 'schools' and branches into a large, national church. In order to do this, there had to be freedom for a variety of ministries and traditions *within* the Reformed tradition. This meant what Lucas calls "a 'big tent' mentality coupled together with a sense of local control which has served to accommodate diversity of practice."[17] And this design has not been completely fruitless. Lucas points out that within 20 years it is very possible that the PCA could be the largest Presbyterian body in the country.

This idea of a 'big tent' Presbyterianism which is nonetheless conservative (unyielding on Biblical inerrancy and Reformed soteriology but open to both Old School and New

---

[16] Sean Michael Lucas, "The PCA: A Conservative (Mainline) Denomination" *Nicotine Theological Journal* Spring 2009, p.2.

[17] Lucas, p.3.

School emphases) explains the PCA's history well. When the PCA began, it put behind itself the controversies that had fractured smaller Reformed bodies in Scotland, the Netherlands, and the U.S.—it allowed confessional exceptions on the Sabbath, it did not press any one millennial view on anyone. As controversies came along—over Mission to the World's cooperative agreements, Mission to North America's church growth methods, confessional subscription, the days of creation, theonomy, the federal vision—in each case the PCA "reaffirmed her loyalty to the broad middle of the Reformed tradition."[18]

This 'big tent' approach, however, sets the PCA up for conflict. Here's an example that is relevant to current controversies. I became pastor of West Hopewell Presbyterian Church in September of 1975, and my congregation had come into the PCA a matter of months before. The church had three adult Sunday School classes, and the senior citizen class, with both men and women, had a female teacher. The teacher immediately asked me, her new young pastor, if in the PCA it was allowed for her to teach adult men in the church. I turned to one of the founders of the PCA, Kennedy Smartt, who was a pastor in the same town. He assured me that while many PCA churches would not allow this, this was up to the local Session. Women could not be ordained officers—but beyond that, he said, the Session could define women's roles in the congregation. Indeed, as I searched the Book of Church Order, I was surprised to find that there was nothing that forbid women praying or reading Scripture in worship (BCO 50-2) or teaching small groups or Sunday School classes containing men. It was an area of freedom where the local Session could direct matters as it saw fit. This is classic PCA—inside a very conservative position (i.e. women cannot be ordained as deacons, elders, or ministers) there is great leeway for what women's roles are inside the congregation.

It is not surprising, however, that this level of congregational and Sessional freedom would lead to conflict over the role of women among the branches of the church. The culturalist branch values innovation, while the pietist values grassroots Session freedom. Over against them, the doctrinalist values uniformity of practice and worries the most about cultural accommodation. The current tensions over the role of women in the church in general, and with the diaconate in particular, is only the latest example of the clash between the branches.

---

[18] Ibid.

The issue beneath the issues

As Lucas writes, over the years there have been a series of issues that have created great conflict in the PCA. As I look back on them, I believe the great majority of them are like earthquakes. Earthquakes are sudden releases of energy arising out of the constant straining of the tectonic plates along fault lines. In our case, the individual issues give the strain an opportunity to release pent up energy and frustration that the branches store up against the other over the years. So there are almost always two levels to each of our controversies—there's the particular issue, and then there's the deeper tension between the branches that is underneath the issue, giving the controversy greater force.

Between seasons of controversy over a particular issue each branch seethes with quiet fear and anger about the others. In private conversations and gatherings, each group worries that the other branch or branches are taking the church too much in a different direction. Indeed, sometimes groups essentially 'fantasize' out loud what the PCA could look like if (as the doctrinalists would have it) the doctrinal latitudinarians would leave or (as the pietists would have it) the narrow sectarians would leave. The doctrinalists are always worried there are 'stealth liberals' in our midst and the social engagement emphasis of some churches will inevitably lead to doctrinal compromise. Those in the social justice branch are afraid that others in the denomination are becoming culturally reactionary, and may, in their phobia against social involvement, become as blind to injustice in our country as the Old School has been in the past (e.g. slavery.) Those in the pietist branch feel that a lack of evangelistic fervor is a serious sin, and they doubt the spiritual vitality of the other branches. Then along comes an issue and the pent up energy (the fear and frustration) is released.

There is a long list of these controversial issues over the years. Some became generated intense debate and confrontation but have not recently taken center stage—like the battles over the MTW cooperative agreements with non-Reformed mission agencies, MNA church planting methodologies, confessional subscription, and the days of creation. Many conflicts turn on the gospel/law distinction. Doctrinalists are concerned that the pietists' love of 'Sonship' teaching puts too much emphasis on grace and acceptance and not enough on the need for holiness. On the other hand, many believe that the culturalists' emphasis on the sacraments are leading toward a new legalism. Another perennial issue has been the role of women, and currently their relationship to the diaconate is under discussion. Finally, there is constant friction over how to interpret the Regulative Principle of worship, so much so that it is almost impossible to craft joint worship services at Presbytery or General Assembly without someone being seriously offended.

While each controversy has its own specific arguments and counter-arguments, there is an "issue under the issue." So many of the controversies have been a way to 'let off steam'—to release the energy of our general frustration with the habitual practices of the other branch or branches. This adds much heat to the arguments and rhetoric. There is a groundnote of fear and anger in the discussion. We fear that the other side is going to get a leg up and move the PCA away from where we have historically been. That is why surrounding every particular controversy is the background theme that the PCA is getting worse, because that particular group over there stands to get more influence. They must be stopped now, or the denomination will go into decline. As we press for our polity changes, we often have the semi-conscious (or very conscious!) goal of making the denomination more inhospitable 'for their kind.' The sub-text in these controversies is, 'and if you don't like it, why don't you leave for another denomination?'

However, over our denomination's 35 years of life, whenever there seemed to be a real chance that the PCA would experience a split, and purge itself of one of its branches, it has pulled back from the precipice. The instinct of the whole General Assembly, especially when it is well attended, has been to *not* choose between the branches and impulses of the church in such a way as to purge or run off a part of the denomination that has been with us from the beginning. Some see this kind of decision as always a 'compromise', even cowardice. I believe that it is usually wisdom and grace.

Why? I believe that all the critiques of the various branches are right. The doctrinalist branch can breed smugness and self-righteousness over its purity, and develop almost an Old Testament concern for ceremonial cleanness—namely, that we must not only not promote views that are suspect, but we must not associate with people who do. The pietistic branch is very pragmatic and results-oriented, and it is resistant to enter into processes of discipline or theological debate, even when that is what is required. The pietist branch also tends to give too much credence to pastors who grow their churches large. The culturalist branch becomes too enamored with modern scholarship, and there are plenty of historical examples of how the emphasis on social engagement and justice has led to the erosion of orthodox theology. Neither the culturalists nor the doctrinalists have a good track record of vigorous evangelism. When it comes to culture, the doctrinalists are deeply concerned by any effort to 'contextualize' yet are often blind to how accommodated they are to previous cultures (17th century British Puritanism or 16th century European Protestantism, or 19th century Southern Presbyterianism.) The pietists are often blind to how accommodated they are to capitalism and popular culture, while

the culturalists are often unaware of how captured they are by elite, contemporary culture.

If you believe that all the critiques are right—then you should be happy (as I am) that the PCA has not thrown out one or two of the branches. If you believe critiques of the other two but you are in denial about the dangers and weaknesses of your own branch, then you will find the breadth of the PCA to be at best troublesome and at worst dangerous.

Where do we go from here?

In 2005-2006 Darryl Hart and John Muether wrote a series on the history of Presbyterianism for <u>New Horizons</u> magazine of the Orthodox Presbyterian church. In the conclusion of their chapter on the formation of the PCA, they wrote that

> "The symmetry between the actions of 1861 and those of 1973 prompted some to accentuate the Old School identity of the PCA….However, the PCA was a diverse body of conflicting theological agendas from its founding."

That is true. The PCA has always been a 'diverse body' filled with 'conflicting theological agendas' though within a conservative set of impermeable boundaries such as the inerrancy of Scripture, Reformed soteriology, and the rejection of the ordination of women. That is because the founders wanted to make room for all the traditional Reformed branches, perhaps not realizing what a challenge it has been historically to keep them all under one roof.

Let's assume that most people are not happy with the level of conflict and strife in our denomination. So what can we do, then, to alleviate the constant struggle and conflict? It seems to me there are only two alternatives to the status quo.

1. Pruning the branches—and why it doesn't work.

The simplest way, it would seem, to bring more unity would be for one of the branches to become ascendant and push the others out. However, I would argue that this is <u>not</u> the way to go, for several reasons.

The first reason is practical. As we have seen, the PCA's hard and fast boundaries were set up by the founders. If a minister denies evangelical fundamentals such as the inerrancy of the Scripture, or the deity of Christ, or if he denies Reformed soteriological fundamentals like election, definite atonement, forensic justification, then our standards

and legislative history call for and enable discipline. Our founders prepared us to discipline any emerging "liberalism" from our ranks. But in order to push out any one of the branches, significant changes to the Book of Church Order will have to be made. But changing the BCO requires an affirmation by two-thirds of the presbyteries, surrounded by two General Assembly majorities. I believe that, in God's providence, the PCA's branches have grown too strong and influential for such significant changes to happen. [19] The reason is that a) each branch is fairly substantial, and b) the 'big tent' ethos of the PCA founders is still alive and well, and therefore there is always a large 'sympathy' vote for unity, as Sean Lucas argued in his article. Many people who are not particularly in agreement with the minority will often vote for the minority in order to keep the unity.

But there is a second reason that 'pruning the branches' will not work, and that reason is *theological.* The 'conflicting theological agendas' of the PCA are not discrete doctrinal systems but are actually abiding *aspects* of the Reformed tradition itself. The fighting between them is <u>not</u> the cold warfare of different nations but rather the white-heat of sibling rivalry. We are alienated brethren, not mortal enemies. The 'DNA' of all three branches is in the Reformed theology itself. To make an illustration, imagine two brothers have very different temperaments which leads to constant conflicts. Finally one brother runs off the other brother in order to get the family farm. The triumphant brother settles down, marries, and has children. As his children grow up, he discovers to his horror than his own sons have the same temperament that he hated so much in his

---

[19] There is no way to make any more than a guess at how big the various branches in the PCA actually are, especially since many ministers and churches mix the influences and don't fit squarely into a single category. William H. Smith in an interesting recent article ("Making Sense of the PCA" in Spring 2009, *Nicotine Theological Journal*) identified the majority of the PCA as consisting of three 'New School' groups. What he calls the' Columbia Seminary founding generation', and those from the RPCES (Covenant Seminary) both have a pietist/revivalist orientation. He also recognized a third 'New School' group, a 'rising leadership' of 'urban/ metropolitan pastors'—but I see this group as actually less pietist (less New Side) and more like Reformed culturalists, with their emphasis on liturgy and community together with cultural engagement and social justice. He then recognizes a 'substantial minority' in the PCA which he considers Old School, but he distinguishes two groups within it--those who are Old School/New Side and those who are more strictly Old School/Old Side. So Smith discerns 5 groups—two more pietist, two more doctrinalist, and one culturalist (that last identification is my own interpretation, not his.) I have seen others make similar kinds of analyses of PCA 'demographics.' If they are correct (and I think they basically are) then the Pietist is the largest branch in the PCA, the Doctrinalist comes in second, and the culturalist third in size. Depending on the issue, the groups line up differently. On the Federal Vision, for example, there was a lot of alignment between pietist and doctrinalist. On most other matters of controversy, the pietist and the culturalist line up, seeking more local autonomy and freedom of expression.

brother. The temperament was in his own blood. There was really is no way to completely expel that temper from the family—it comes in the genes. In the same way, the doctrinalist, pietist, and culturalist impulses are all born of the same theology. We must learn to live together.

The history of conservative Presbyterianism in the U.S., Scotland, and the Netherlands over the last 125 years is a painful account of bloody splits and the formation of many new, smaller, and weaker denominations. Let me assert right here that there is nothing wrong with smallness *per se.* (Pietists and culturalists often sneer at smallness as being intrinsically inferior, and I think this one of their inherent spiritual blind spots which rightly makes doctrinalists furious.) Splitting a church over an issue of truth and conscience can sometimes lead to theological and spiritual renewal. The best example of this, I think, was the original Disruption of 1843 of the Church of Scotland, led by Thomas Chalmers, after which the new Free Church of Scotland grew in both quality and quantity, reaching out across the land in an explosion of both new church development and a renewed sense of social responsibility. In this case, the new 'schism' church was truly a healthy new Reformed church with all its historic impulses intact.

Nevertheless, such fruit from church splits is rare. A more normal result of church splits is the pruning off of branches in a way that both wounds and yet, ironically, does not last. Something of this pattern, I think, can be seen in the history of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.[20] Early in its history, after the death of J. Gresham Machen, the OPC went through a split in which its New Side/New School branch left, led by J.Oliver Buswell of Wheaton College and Carl T. McIntire. But, no surprise, by the 1970s the OPC had grown a new 'pietist/revivalist' wing under the influence of Jack Miller. The New Life Churches and their Sonship course was classic revivalism, and it did not fit well with the more doctrinalist cast of the OPC. While not a formal split, like that of 1937, the New Life churches were made to feel unwelcome and nearly all left in the early 90s to swell the pietist ranks of the PCA.

Whenever a Reformed church purifies itself by purging itself of one of its impulses, it finds that within a generation or two, its younger leaders are starting to at look in a friendly way toward the lost parts. Why? The answer is largely the richness of Reformed theology itself.

---

[20] Here I want to declare my great respect for the many accomplishments of the OPC, and for my many friends within it. Nevertheless, in one way, the denomination's history reveals the pattern I'm discussing here.

There is a third reason that we should learn to live together. Because we are brethren, we need each other. Let's recount a sad case study that illustrates this--the issue of 19th century African slavery. The New Schoolers lacked doctrinal robustness but they were strongly abolitionist. The Old Schoolers saw the danger of the New School's intense campaigns to reform society—they saw how they could distract from the ministry of the Word, evangelism, and the sacraments. They saw how the New School's cultural accommodation was leading to doctrinal decline. As a consequence, much of the Old School, especially in the South refused to denounce African chattel slavery as being the evil that it was. Mark Noll has shown in _The Civil War as a Theological Crisis_ and _America's God_ that the church's inability to agree that slavery was evil directly led to the disaster of the Civil War and that was the reason that evangelicalism has never again had the cultural credibility in the U.S. that it had before the 1830s. Old School leader Charles Hodge was caught in the middle of this, perhaps because he was one of leaders who tried to achieve a balance of confessionalism and revivalism in the Presbyterian church. On the one hand, he saw what poor theological reasoning lay behind the arguments of the abolitionists and the New School. On the other hand, he rightly sensed the danger that 'the spirituality of the church doctrine' could lead to cultural captivity in the other direction—the conservative one. Noll points out that Hodge began to criticize slavery too late to have brought about unity within Presbyterianism on the subject.[21] In short, the Old School's fear of cultural engagement caused it to fail this great test. And yet the New School's over-involvement in politics and social reform did indeed lead it later to doctrinal compromise. So both schools were right in their criticism of the other.

Each branch of Presbyterianism needs the others in order to escape its own inherent blind spots and weaknesses. But the conflicts that arise between the branches often accentuate and stimulate those very weaknesses. Richard Lovelace used to say doctrinalists are like white corpuscles, that are better at defending the faith (against heretical 'infections') than propagating the faith. The pietists and reformists are like red corpuscles that in their pragmatism do a better job of propagating the faith and yet often lay it open to doctrinal indifference or decline. Too many white blood cells over red blood cells is leukemia; too many red blood cells over white blood cells is AIDS. We need each other. We can't live comfortably with each other, but we are much less robust and vital apart from each other.

---

[21] Mark Noll, _America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln_ (Oxford, 2002) pp.414-415.

2. Owning the branches

There is only one other way to go, if we still believe that the status quo as unsatisfactory. I would like the PCA to be one of the few Presbyterian denominations in history to *own* all its historic impulses. This means we must not assume the other branches (besides your own) are somehow aberrant tumors that need to be excised.

Each of our branches is divided internally between those who own the other branches and those who do not. Recently I read a conversation on line by two 'doctrinalists' who were discussing a book by a famous PCA 'pietist.' The first reviewer loved the book, and recommended it, even though he disagreed with it at two points--it did not hold to a traditional Puritan view of the Sabbath or a strict view of the Regulative principle. The second reviewer had the same differences with the book, but concluded that is made the book impossible to recommend. The disagreement then played out like this. The first man said that while the author was in error, he had engaged other positions seriously, and had argued against them on the basis of the Bible. The first reviewer said that, while the Sabbath and the Regulative principle were vital issues, many orthodox Reformed thinkers have disagreed on them, and they could not be put on the same level as the doctrines justification by faith and the atonement. The second reviewer was not mollified, and argued that slackness with regard to the Sabbath and the Regulative principle of worship were key problems in the PCA. So this was a harmful book. The sub-text was pretty obvious. The first doctrinalist 'owned' the pietist author as one of the family, and the second reviewer wished the pietists and all with his views and confessional exceptions were all gone from our midst. From what I could tell, the first reviewer was not more "liberal" in his views than the second. The distinction was in their differing attitudes toward those who disagreed with them.

I use this illustration of two doctrinalists, but these divisions are in the other camps as well. Doctrinalists are regularly scorned by the other branches as "TRs." On some blogs, the TRs are encouraged to leave the PCA for smaller, more conservative denominations, just as many others have been urged to leave the PCA for broader communions. There are those who want to live together, own one another, and learn from one another, and those who are opposed and angry at the other camps, and do not want to be associated with them. Some feel impure and polluted by their connection to others in their denomination, and deeply ashamed of them. They want to be cleansed. But, as I have argued above, the only way for a Presbyterian denomination to stay 'pure' is to go through constant, purges which will keep the whole church absorbed in controversy rather than ministry. We must 'own' each other as legitimate brethren, not aberrations.

So how can we, practically speaking, 'own' each other and learn to live together? What is the way forward? I wrote this essay more for diagnosis than prescription, but certain ideas come to mind.

a. Recognizing the two parts of controversy.

Almost always, a certain percentage of the heat of a particular controversy comes from intemperate language and personal attacks that stem from unmortified pride in our own hearts. I once heard Dick Gaffin of Westminster Seminary say that he had never seen a protracted theological controversy that wasn't to a significant degree a personality clash as well as a theological clash. That statement was in no way meant to diminish the importance of the doctrinal issues involved, but it should humble us and make us think prayerfully before we open our mouths in debate. Most theological conflicts have two parts: the theological difference and spiritual pride.

In a classic letter by John Newton on controversy, he states that major theological controversy nearly always consists of two parts--partly of a concern for truth, and partly of a concern for 'self.' He writes: "Whatever… makes us trust in ourselves that we are comparatively wise or good, so as to treat those with contempt who do not subscribe to our doctrines, or follow our party, is a proof and fruit of a self-righteous spirit." He argues that whenever contempt and superiority accompanies our arguments, it is a sign that, "the doctrines of grace" are not operating in our life "as mere notions and speculations" with "no salutary influence upon [our] conduct." Finally, Newton delivers his most devastating blow:

> "Self-righteousness can feed upon doctrines as well as upon works; and a man may have the heart of a Pharisee, while his head is stored with orthodox notions of the unworthiness of the creature, and the riches of free grace. Yea, I would add, the best of men are not wholly free from this leaven; and therefore are too apt to be pleased with such representations as hold up our adversaries to ridicule, and by consequence flatter our own superior judgments. Controversies, for the most part, are so managed as to indulge rather than to repress his wrong disposition; and therefore, generally speaking, they are productive of little good. They provoke those whom they should convince, and puff up those whom they should edify."

> Newton grounds his exhortation in texts such as 2 Timothy 2:24-26. "The Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance…" The balance in this text is important. We *are* to correct others.

We are not to shrink from theological critique. (Pietists, which are probably the largest group in the PCA, are often over-allergic to theological debate.) And yet we are to do it with so much gentleness and kindness, without the angry sarcasm ("not resentful") that, as Newton writes, we can "persuade [our opponents] that, whether we convince them or not, we wish well to their souls, and contend only for the truth's sake; if we can satisfy them that we act upon these motives, our point is half gained; they will be more disposed to consider calmly what we offer; and if they should still dissent from our opinions, they will be constrained to approve our intentions."

How do we apply what Paul and John Newton say to the PCA? Very strong language is indeed employed when God, Jesus, or the prophets are condemning heresy and immorality, but this cannot be our default mode when speaking to each other over missions strategy, worship practices, and other issues of church order. In general, then, we should be wary of heated, disdainful, mocking language. Why? First, because it is contrary to St Paul's directions. Second, because, as Paul and Newton say, it is almost always counter-productive, it is unpersuasive. Third, because while not all cutting sarcasm is a sign of pride, the majority of times it is. Anyone who uses it regularly or even frequently shows they don't fear falling into pride at all. And that's a bad sign. Proud people don't think they are proud, while humble people know they are.

b. Judging our own motives, not our opponents.

Besides harsh, mocking, abrasive language in general, there is a particular practice that we will have to avoid. Jesus told us to take the log out of our own eye before we take the speck out of our brothers'. We should not question others' faulty motives without taking an even closer look at our own.

We have argued that every one of the Reformed branches are animated by both good impulses *and* bad motives. There is nothing more contrary to Jesus' words in Matthew 7 than an argument in which you question your opponents motivations while assuming your own are absolutely pure. A good example of this is found in Hart and Muether's survey of Presbyterian history mentioned previously. At one point they wrote:

> [T]he PCA has grown tenfold in thirty years….What is less clear is the extent to which it is growing as a <u>Presbyterian</u> denomination. The distinct convictions of Southern Presbyterian orthodoxy have receded in most quarters of the church. The *Presbyterian Journal* evolved into *World* magazine, and "word and deed ministry" has begun to eclipse the "spirituality of the church" in the vocabulary of the PCA. These are signs that the denomination may be more eager to locate

itself on the cutting edge of culture reformation than to foster a coherently Reformed and Presbyterian identity.

The last sentence assumes you have to choose between engaging culture and being Presbyterian. One of the key ways that we refuse to "own" the other branches as genuine Presbyterianism is through *ad hominem* arguments instead of theological ones. In this case, they claim that one branch is animated mainly by bad motivation. According to the authors, cultural reformists are motivated by mainly by the desire to be 'on the cutting edge' of culture. They are not trying to be faithful to the Scripture or the Reformed faith, but rather are excited about being perceived as being very relevant and up to date. Meanwhile, doctrinalists are motivated only by 'a desire to foster a coherently Reformed and Presbyterian identity." That kind of argument doesn't treat our opponents with respect, it doesn't engage their arguments in their strongest form.

This is one of the main ways that, in our debates, we disown each other. Culturalists are often caricatured as being 'so hip' with mocking comments about their facial hair and informal dress. Pietists are accused of loving big churches and wearing 'power ties' and watering down doctrinal distinctives in order to broaden their appeal and become popular. Also, both pietists and culturalists are regularly accused of being cowards, of selling out to the culture and not speaking out loudly enough about sin. Doctrinalists, however, are accused of being narrow-minded, 'uptight', and of needing to control everyone around them. Pietists and Culturalists charge any of their concern for doctrinal accuracy as legalism.

These are, indeed, caricatures of one another. Cartoonists who depict real people always exaggerate prominent features (ears, nose, chin) into a semi-ludicrous though recognizable shape. When we assign mainly bad motives to our opponents and mainly good motives to ourselves we indeed treat them as cartoon characters. Instead of speaking with respect and affection, and acknowledging the particular ways in which our opponents are stronger than we are, and then (nonetheless!) making our critique, we caricature them as one-dimensional beings--not only are their views in error, but their motives are dishonest too.

Obviously, this is opposes much of what the Bible says about giving criticism. We are to be more critical of our own bad motives than we are of others (that, in great part, is what Jesus meant by 'taking the log out of our own eye.' Matt 7:3-5.) As one commentator says about Mt 7:3-4, we must only give criticism in a "meek and self-judging spirit (cf. 1 Cor 11:31; Gal 6:1.)" [22] So while it is important not to assign motives to others, it is

---

[22] D.A. Carson, *Matthew* (The Expositor's Bible Commentary) vol 1, (Zondervan, 1995) p.184.

equally vital that we identify the false motives in ourselves. There *is* something to the stereotypes. The culturalists can be too proud of being relevant, the pietists can be too proud of being successful, and the doctrinalists *can* be too proud of being right. There is more than a kernel of truth in the caricatures. Each Reformed branch has its weaknesses and spiritual blind spots, and we participate in them. We must be quicker to identify our own bad motives than those opposed to us. We must have a spirit of repentance as we make our arguments. There are particular 'logs' in the eyes of each Reformed branch. Those logs are keeping us from 'seeing' each other clearly enough to have fruitful debates and discussions. They must come out! But we must take them out of our own eyes before we can even discuss the obstructions in our brothers' field of vision.

c. Not moving the original boundary markers– Hart, Muether, and Lucas agree that the majority of the founding generation wanted the PCA to be solidly Reformed and evangelical, but nonetheless a 'conservative big tent' where the various branches could all thrive. I believe that the only way for the PCA to be a place where we own each other is for us to re-affirm the original boundary markers that the founders set up.

The founders' drew very specific boundaries at certain points. One that has always been very important has been a high view of Scripture, with a robust, traditional belief in inerrancy. Another has to do with the core of Reformed theology and soteriology—there are to be no "four point Calvinists" in our church. In many other areas where some Reformed denominations have drawn narrower lines—Sabbath observance, worship (e.g. Psalms-only,) eschatology—the founders left room for diversity. As Reformed Christians, we are to be ever judging ourselves and our practices by the Scripture. Nevertheless, it is wise to institutionally give those original boundary markers great weight in our debates.

For example, the Creation Study Committee Report to the 28th General Assembly (2000) states:

> A survey of recent PCA history and practice yields the following. First, it has been assumed in the conservative Reformed community for more than 150 years (on the strength of the witness of Shaw, Hodge, Mitchell and Warfield) that the *Confession* articulates no particular position on the nature and duration of the creation days and that one's position on the subject is a matter of indifference. Second, and in that light, many of the founding fathers of the PCA took their ordination vows in good conscience while holding to non-literal views of the creation days or while holding to that issue as a matter of indifference. It would be less than charitable for any of us to view them as unprincipled.

That study paper recognized that there had always been a diversity about the length of the Genesis 1 days and the age of the earth, and in the end this diversity was honored. The original boundary markers were not moved. They were re-affirmed and defended.

Let's take an issue that is before us now—the role of women in the church. BCO 50-2 leaves it open for women the read Scripture in worship services, though this is not done in the majority of PCA churches. Many people in our midst would like to take away that particular freedom that the BCO gives Sessions, and move the boundary markers. I believe that would be wrong, that it would make our church like the other Presbyterian churches that have lost their other branches. More specifically, there is controversy over the role of women and the work of the diaconate. The BCO encourages Sessions to select and appoint women to assist the deacons in their work (BCO 9-7) but it does not restrict the Session by prescribing how they are to be selected, how they are to work with the deacons in their day to day labors, and how they are to be designated and recognized within the congregation. The local church Session has had freedom in this area. If one branch revised the BCO to forbid any Sessions from publicly commissioning unordained women to positions of diaconal service alongside the deacons, which many have for decades—surely some from our pietistic branch and those from the reformist branch would feel they were deliberately being made to feel unwelcome in our ranks. On the other hand, if another branch of the church succeeded in revising the BCO to allow women to be ordained deacons—surely a great number in our more doctrinalist branch would feel their consciences were being violated and would feel 'pushed out.'

Instead, I make a very conservative proposal. Let's defend the existing boundary markers where they are. If people cross the existing "fence posts", let's call them to account. But do not move the markers so that some churches which have been in the denomination for decades would be pushed out. Let's not do this in either direction, making the PCA more liberal or conservative, more broad or narrow. To 'own' each other, we should follow the lead of the Creation Study Committee and give real weight to the original PCA consensus.

d. Learning from and 'flavoring' each other.

The last thing we could do to move forward is the hardest of all. The above proposals are only ways of helping us to conduct our debates and controversies less destructively. So, in a sense, up to now all we have been talking about 'medicine.' But medicine is not the same thing as food. What can we do positively and proactively to build greater unity? The main way we could actually forge greater unity between ourselves is by

letting some of the other branches' emphases and strengths color, flavor, and affect our own approaches to doing ministry. How? I can think of three ways.

First, we should look at our individual, personal study programs. Early Princeton Seminary represented a synthesis of Old Side emphasis on creed and church polity and the New Side emphasis on spiritual experience and piety. Professors such as Archibald Alexander and Charles Hodge only came to their combination of impulses by long and appreciative listening to and reading of different sources. I have noticed that, in the PCA, the various 'branches' have almost mutually exclusive reading lists. Simply stated, we don't read each other's books. We have not listened long and intently to each other's spiritual mentors and teachers. I've concluded this is no small thing.

Secondly, we need to create communities of learning that parallel our presbyteries and General Assembly in which we communally read and discuss the key texts of the various Reformed branches. In reading the new biography of Calvin by Bruce Gordon I was struck by how Calvin required that all the pastors of Geneva meet to study the Scripture together every Friday morning. This was called 'the venerable company of pastors'. Many the volumes called 'Calvin's' lectures' were really Calvin's extempore comments written down as the company of pastors worked themselves through great blocks of Biblical material. When do we do that within our presbyteries? The more I have read what Calvin and the other Continental Reformers did when their pastors met, the less it looks like what we call presbytery.

Third, we should establish some central space (or spaces) in which serious and yet informal discussion of theological and ministry issues could take place. In our courts, we debate very specific complaints and overtures. But in judicial and parliamentary process, the underlying theological differences cannot usually be fully discussed. Also, whenever theological debates occur on the floors of judicatories or commissions, individual personalities are involved, and disciplinary censures may be the result of the discussion, and this also prevents the participants from debating the foundational issues. If we are going to maintain our diversity and come to at least *some* greater unity, we must create and use such venues and spaces.