The Church Faces Schism

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Wardlaw • T. Currie • Wheeler • Williams • Ray García • Watson • J. Currie • Stubbs
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Introduction

This issue of Insights is devoted to consideration of a concern shared by many of us, in these days: the challenge of schism facing the church.

While the particular focus, in the essays and reflections that follow, is on the current situation and dynamics in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), we believe the issue will also be of interest to members of other denominations committed to upholding both the unity and the sanctity of the church.

Our contributors have different views with respect to the change recently made to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)’s ordination standards. With the adoption of “Amendment 10-A,” presbyteries are for the first time now allowed (but not required) to ordain those they discern are called to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament, regardless of sexual orientation. This issue of Insights is not devoted to debating ordination standards. It is, instead, committed to our thinking together about what it would mean to stay united, as a church, even with our different views.

In their opening essays, Austin Seminary’s president, Theodore J. Wardlaw, and Union Presbyterian Seminary’s Charlotte campus dean, Thomas W. Currie, argue persuasively that to be church is to stay together. President Wardlaw suggests that churches in the Reformed tradition have been too apt to split off from one another. He reminds us that, when differences divide us, we are being less than who we are as the church of Jesus Christ. He calls us to confess the ways in which we have each contributed to the “bad spirit” that has “arisen among us,” asking us to recommit ourselves to one another—to those with whom we agree, and to those with whom we disagree—as “friends in ministry.” Dean Currie crafts a beautiful and faithful ecclesiology, reminding us that we in the church are “stuck with each other.” Like Wardlaw, he is bold about naming our sin and calling us to “name our own complicity in dividing the body of Christ.” He exhorts us to bear witness to the importance of church unity, to weep at disunity, to watch and wait for the healing of our brokenness as a bride awaits the coming of our bridegroom, and to meanwhile love the church that “gets so little love.”

These essays are followed by shorter but equally thoughtful pieces by Barbara Wheeler, John Williams, Richard Ray, Lemuel García, Sallie Watson, and James Currie. Each of these writers offers their own take on staying together. In addition, we have included a copy of a statement made by the First Presbyterian Church of Atlanta that we believe models what a commitment to church unity, written by an ecclesial body, might look like. The issue closes with New Testament Associate Professor Monya Stubbs talking about another kind of schism in our culture: schism between political parties. Stubbs shows how such conflict contributes to income inequality, and how we can learn to “fight to make up,” rather than to “break up,” in order to improve education for all.

We hope you will find this issue helpful to your reflection and your work at this crucial juncture in our church’s history.

As always, we thank you for reading and supporting Insights.

Cynthia Rigby, Editor
*The W.C. Brown Professor of Theology, Austin Seminary*
Over the last number of months in which our Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has been roiled first by the rhetoric of schism and now by its reality, I have been nurtured and comforted by this prayer for church unity that is found in our church’s Book of Common Worship:

*Holy God, giver of peace, author of truth,*
*we confess that we are divided and at odds with one another,*
*that a bad spirit has risen among us*
*and set us against your Holy Spirit of peace and love.*
*Take from us the mistrust, party spirit, contention,*
*and all evil that now divides us.*
*Work in us a desire for reconciliation,*
*so that, putting aside personal grievances,*
*we may go about your business with a single mind,*
*devoted to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

The prayer is startling in its frankness. It doesn’t sugarcoat anything; it just puts


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it out there: “A bad spirit has risen among us.” Schism and its persistence in the
church of Jesus Christ has been such a constant that we have come to accept it,
sadly, as a given. Indeed, equally sadly, we have placed this prayer in our liturgical
resources with the good bet that, on any given day in our church’s life, it is relevant.

My most dramatic awareness of the effects of schism came early in my minis-
try, at the funeral of an uncle. This service occurred prior to the reunion of the Pres-
byterian Church in the U.S. and the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. It was
held at a Presbyterian church in rural Georgia that had been founded by Scottish
ancestors in the early nineteenth century. My great-great-great-great grandfather
and my great-great-great grandfather, both of them gentleman farmers and Pres-
byterian elders, had been two of the five charter members of that church. My father
and his six siblings represented the first generation to venture from the environs of
that church—where all of them had been baptized and catechized and confirmed
and where some of them had been married—and to seek their livelihoods else-
where. But across the years of my childhood, all of them and their families had still
gathered at that church for a family reunion every first Sunday in May. Full of Sun-
day dinner from a groaning table in that church’s Fellowship Hall, we cousins had
spent whole hours playing hide-and-seek and chasing one another in the church
cemetery, and, at a moment each year before the end of the reunion, had joined the
adults in flowering the tombstones of our forebears resting in the family plot.

Now, at the first funeral of one of my father’s siblings, we were back there
again. Across the dais of that church, behind and above my uncle’s closed casket,
there were four robed pastors officiating—one, me, from the Presbyterian Church,
U.S., one from the United Presbyterian Church U.S.A., one from the Associate Re-
formed Presbyterian Church, and one from the Presbyterian Church in America.
With the exception of the Presbyterian Church in America pastor (the church had
just recently left the Presbyterian Church, U.S. to become a member of the Presby-
terian Church in America because of its resistance to Civil Rights and the leadership
of women), the rest of us pastors were all Wardlaw relatives. Each of us, though
serving three different denominational bodies, was a member of the same family
and a descendent of that same church.

Oddly enough, in this very Presbyterian family, we could not often talk at re-
unions about church (it would have been safer to talk about politics). Because, even
in our family—in so many ways so close—“a bad spirit had risen among us.” It was
the spirit of schism.

This spirit isn’t an unheard-of spirit, to be sure, especially for some reason
among descendants of John Calvin. It is a sadly verifiable fact that among the Pro-
estant traditions spawned by the Reformation of the 16th century, we Calvinists
have by far the sorriest record for schism. Perhaps this weakness is the shadow
side of a strength—a confessional tradition that yields both a rigorous theologi-
cal foundation and the great possibility for arguments over what that foundation
means. Whatever the cause, the result of this weakness has been described well by
Austin Seminary alum and Union Presbyterian Seminary Dean Thomas W. Currie,
my fellow lead writer for this issue of Insights. “There is no purer church out there,”
Tom says. “That is the great Protestant if not Presbyterian heresy, i.e., to think that we could, by separating ourselves from each other, create a more faithful church.”

After centuries of such separations, though, we are perhaps so punch-drunk from our fights that there are those in our communion who blithely submit that schism is just part of our DNA, is maybe even a good thing. In the wake of what strikes me at times as a facts-optional “truthiness” at the root of some of our current debate, and from both sides, there seems a disturbing tendency to shrug schism off as inevitable, as if we need pay no price for the ways in which it diminishes our churches, often our families, and maybe even our souls.

If schism is just part of what it means to be Reformed, is it therefore also biblical? None other than St. Paul suggests that it is not. His first epistle to the church at Corinth is virtually a manual in conflict management, as that church was apparently deeply divided over a host of issues. To read First Corinthians, which one can do in one sitting, is to be astonished at how contemporary it is. “For the body does not consist of one member but of many,” writes Paul. “If the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the organs in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single organ, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.” Paul is not finished with this argument; he’s just getting started: “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ On the contrary, the parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those parts of the body which we think less honorable we invest with the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior part, that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.” And finally, the conclusion of his argument as he points his finger across time at all of us: “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it …”

A bad spirit, once again, has risen among our ecclesial body. For several decades, the prevailing attention in our communion has been focused upon the debate over the ordination issue. This debate has similarly captured the attention of other churches in the Protestant mainline—the United Church of Christ, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America, to name just a few. In 1996 our General Assembly sent out for ratification by the presbyteries a constitutional amendment that sought to clarify the issue by, in effect, disallowing non-celibate gay or lesbian people to be ordained

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as pastors, elders, or deacons. That amendment was ratified by more than the requisite number of presbyteries, and thus was part of our constitution for fifteen years. Across those years, the argument continued, and several amendments designed to remove this constitutional prohibition were sent out from the General Assembly but turned down by the needed majority of presbyteries; and so the church continued in a situation in which a bare majority prevailed on this matter and was resisted by a large minority. At the 2010 General Assembly in Minneapolis, another challenge to the prohibition was sent out to the presbyteries—Amendment 10-A, and in early 2011 it was passed by more than the needed majority of presbyteries. Thus the “bare majority/large minority” situation flipped, and Amendment 10-A became part of our constitution.

This amendment reads as follows:

Standards for ordained service reflect the church’s desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life (G-1.0000). The governing body responsible for ordination and/or installation (G-14.0240; G-14.0450) shall examine each candidate’s calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability for the responsibilities of office. The examination shall include, but not be limited to, a determination of the candidate’s ability and commitment to fulfill all requirements as expressed in the constitutional questions for ordination and installation (W-4.4003). Governing bodies shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates.

As this amendment was being passed, on February 2nd of 2011, a public letter went out to the church—signed initially by some forty-plus pastors—that began with the claim that the Presbyterian Church was “deathly ill,” and after citing their evidence for this, this group of pastors invited people “like-minded” in their assessment of the poor health of the church to come to a meeting in Minneapolis to be held in August. That meeting in August drew some 1900 people—pastors and laypeople representing 830 congregations in 49 states. While a number of those people—maybe 100, maybe 200—were there as observers and not supporters, the meeting was primarily a meeting of sympathizers; and this group described themselves as “The Fellowship.” The primary news coming out of this meeting of The Fellowship was the announcement of the formation of a new legal entity that would be shaped into a new Presbyterian body, and that a constitutional framework and organizational infrastructure for this body would be established at a subsequent meeting in Orlando in January 2012. That meeting took place, with a slightly larger crowd in attendance, and a new Presbyterian body—the Evangelical Covenanting Order (E.C.O.)—was born.

Those in support of the Fellowship and the E.C.O. have offered a good bit of critique of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). I agree with some of it. I lament, as they do, the lack of emphasis upon a robust program of effective evangelism. There are more Muslims in this country now than the sum total of practicing Presbyterians and Episcopalians in America; and while neither of these two colonial churches has ever been as large numerically as our influence, the Great Commission—our
calling to make disciples and to baptize in the name of the Triune God—lays out an imperative that we should take seriously. After all, as Karl Barth reminded us, the church is not here for its own sake, but for the sake of the world. The Fellowship has also critiqued at many points the overly bureaucratic tendencies of our ecclesial structures, and I agree with a good bit of their critique. I am also inspired by their passion for mission and the effectiveness of many of their missional priorities around the world. I am concerned, as they are, over the decline of young adult involvement in our church (even as I notice with excitement the increase of young adult involvement in our seminaries and certainly Austin Seminary). One of their most commonly expressed fears is the one that they may somehow be compelled by their presbyteries to ordain gay and lesbian elders or deacons against their conscience, and I and so many others would certainly support their relief of conscience on this point. Finally, I would wish for them to stay in our communion, and to re-engage with it—because, truth to tell, many of the leaders of this fellowship withdrew a long time ago from engagement as leaders in our presbyteries, synods, and General Assembly; and a number of their churches withdrew a long time ago from significant financial support of these various bodies. I would encourage them to stay in this church and to re-engage with it, because their presence and participation in the life of our church makes our church better. Speaking personally, it is my judgment that none of their expressed concerns about the church are dividing issues that lead to schism.

After all, as St. Paul reminds us, “If all were a single organ, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.” Tom Are Jr., a large-church pastor in the Kansas City area and a member of the Austin Seminary Board, has made this observation about Paul’s ecclesiology: “In every letter of Paul, not only Corinthians and Romans, but even Philemon, and in every gospel there is exhortation for the church to live in unity. This tells us two things. It tells us that we are not in a new place. From the beginning, Christians have struggled to be in communion with others called by Christ. This has never been easy, which is why almost every New Testament voice speaks to this concern. But more importantly, the pervasiveness of this message informs us that being in communion with one another is a central ethic of our faith and a primary witness to the world. To elevate our thoughts about Jesus above our fidelity to his body, as Paul describes it, is centrally unbiblical.”

So, just as there are arguments about the body coming from The Fellowship with which I agree, there are other arguments with which I respectfully take exception. I wish to dwell upon two of them now, and, in conclusion, to offer a confession and an invitation.

The Matter of Scripture
Many members of The Fellowship have concerns about biblical interpretation in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). At the Minneapolis meeting of the Fellowship in August of 2011, one of the Fellowship’s chief spokespersons, The Reverend Jim Sin-
gleton, a large-church pastor in Colorado Springs, said in his address to that body that the change in ordination standards was, as he put it, “another part of the erosion of the way we understand biblical authority. However, to arrive at our different conclusions,” he continued, “there must be a very different set of interpretive tools used. And that other set of interpretive tools affects many other substantial truths of the scripture. Because of that other way of biblical interpretation, something subtle changed between us long ago. We often use the same words, but quite often mean different things by them.”

This was a challenge to so-called “critical,” or “scholarly” readings of scripture—methods of scriptural interpretation which have been the most accepted ways that Presbyterian and other Protestant mainline and Catholic seminaries have approached scripture for as far back as the last seventy years. These are ways of bringing the fruits of other investigative disciplines to bear in the reading of scripture, and this approach was characterized in this address in August as having “allowed us to be Lord over the scripture and pick and choose.”

On behalf of a prevailing and respected approach to the interpretation of scripture, I take exception to that. The fact of the matter is that the church and scripture have always been in a special kind of dialectical relationship, and it was in fact the church itself that determined, finally, the shape of scripture as we know it today. Debates about what should and should not be part of the canon of scripture go all the way back to the second century, and those debates raged during the Reformation period. In the Reformation, there was a rejection, on the one hand, of the Catholic church’s consideration of extra-canonical material, such as the Apocrypha, as an additional source of God’s revelation; and on the other hand, of the Anabaptists’ claim that they had received new, extra-canonical revelation. Scholars struggled fervently over these matters, and what we now have in our Bibles as a result of all of that is the church’s long-fought-over definition of the canon of scripture. That canon, by the way, has been challenged by some in our own lifetimes, when certain scholars lobbied for Martin Luther King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” to be added to the scriptural canon. The canon has been established, and then defended, over and over again—by the church!

When the Westminster divines wrote the Westminster Confession—the cornerstone of our theological tradition—they asserted: “Under the name of Holy Scripture, or the Word of God written, are now contained all the books of the Old and New Testaments, which are these...” and then follows a list, just the way it appears in your Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, of the books of the Bible as we know it today. Why did they do that? Because asserting this list was a necessary point of clarification in their time. The church has always been in that kind of relationship with scripture. On the one hand, the church by no means owns scripture! But on the other hand, it was the church that initially determined the canon of scripture—what would be, and what would not be, our scripture as we know it now.

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6. Ibid., 7.
The church has often had to define and defend what scripture would include and what it would not include.

At the end of the day, however, the church is not the “Lord over scripture”—for the Bible, as many have said, is not just the book that we read; it is also the book that reads us. In its majesty, the Bible reminds us, over and over again, that we are not the masters of scripture. I remember as a child growing up in a racist and segregated South, where I was impacted by the awareness, at least, of the Civil Rights movement, going to church one day and being startled to hear from scripture: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (Galatians 3:28-29). It was my experience that, if the church in the Civil Rights period attempted to be Lord over that scripture, then scripture, thanks be to God, prevailed!

Presbyterians have generally been nourished by preaching that has been deeply influenced by scholarly tools designed to help us be grateful recipients of a revealed religion. That is a great strength of our tradition. But we are also surrounded by examples in our time of a less reverent approach to scripture that opens the way to a kind of arbitrariness, and sometimes violence, toward the interpretation that scholarly methods, in part, are trying to correct.

The approach to scripture at the heart of Austin Seminary’s curriculum and mission, for example, stands humbly under the authority of scripture. It (1) recognizes that Jesus Christ is the Redeemer, the center of scripture; (2) depends on the guidance of the Holy Spirit in interpreting and applying scripture; (3) is guided by the doctrinal consensus of the church; (4) places all interpretations of scripture under the rule of love—to love God and neighbor; (5) assumes earnest study of the historical and cultural context influencing the text; and (6) seeks to interpret a particular passage in light of the whole Bible.

In such ways as this, we are persistently claiming that the church, in a dialectical relationship with scripture from the beginning, is emphatically not the Lord over scripture.

The Matter of Diversity
A second objective I now hear being articulated by leaders and adherents of The Fellowship, stemming perhaps from last year’s shift in the constitution regarding ordination, is the option of sorting themselves into a body of “the like-minded.” The invitation in the Fellowship’s letter back in February 2011 was for all those “like-minded” to come to the meeting in Minneapolis in August. The notion, now desired by many, of forming in subsets of presbyteries is in order to assure gatherings of the “like-minded.” The formation of the Evangelical Covenanting Order is to make possible a Reformed body, on specifically articulated points, of the “like-minded.” Having separate Committees on Ministry or Committees on Preparation for Ministry is an appeal for us to begin re-arranging ourselves according to principles shared by the “like-minded.”

Our polity, though, has never exalted such like-mindedness as a worthy eccle-
sial value. To the contrary, our polity is based upon the assumption—maybe even upon the necessity, from time to time—that we will disagree. Why else are we required, when ordained as pastors, elders or deacons, to take this vow: “Will you be a friend among your colleagues in ministry, working with them, subject to the ordering of God’s Word and Spirit?” This vow emerged, when the two major Presbyterian bodies reunited, from a heftier vow that I took at my ordination in the old Southern Presbyterian Church: “Do you promise subjection to your brethren in the Lord?”

The assumption behind such vows is that we will, from time to time, disagree; and that it is often in the process of such civil and respectful debate that the will of the Holy Spirit is discerned. Sometimes, in the very process of voting and thus in one sense demonstrating no like-mindedness at all, presbyteries have nonetheless exercised discernment about this or that issue—that, in God’s good time, it will not pass, or it will not pass yet. We believe that, through such means, the Holy Spirit speaks to the church. I have lost my share of votes across my thirty-three years of ordained ministry, but I’ve never assumed that, therefore, I should leave the church. If there is a biblical precedent for our polity, it is, again, this text from Paul: “There are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’”

It is my own sense that sorting ourselves into tribes of the like-minded is futile. After all, how long can we suppose that the like-mindedness will last? Will we remain like-minded for two years? Twenty years? We can divide over matters of difference, but those matters of difference do not stand still; and the history of the Reformed tradition—the story of how, so often, schism has in time only bred more schism—teaches us that like-mindedness doesn’t last for long. Once again, “The heresy of the Reformed tradition is that, somewhere out there, there is a purer church.”

Years ago now, before I came to the presidency of Austin Seminary and while I was still serving a parish in Greater Atlanta Presbytery, a particularly fractious meeting of that governing body ended after a long day of difficult votes. Finally there was that long-awaited moment of liberation—a vote to adjourn!—and then we were invited to stand for the closing prayer. Our presbytery moderator in that year was a fellow pastor who was particularly steeped in a rich devotional life, and when he led us in prayer it was as if he were curling his toes over the very edge of Heaven itself. As we stood to pray on this occasion, he kept a long silence before he finally uttered these words, which were in equal parts both simple and profound: “Lord, we are forever asking you for many things, and what you are forever giving us instead … is the gift of one another.”

At the heart of our polity is the conviction that, even when we do not always agree, God is forever giving us the gift of one another. Liberal or conservative, male or female, black or white or brown, gay or straight; we are given, through Jesus Christ, to one another, and for the sake of a broken world—as a body which, in the mind of God, is at its best a sign of the Kingdom.

7. “Muddled in the Middle,” The Presbyterian Outlook
A Confession and An Invitation

Which leads me, finally, toward a confession. It is a completely natural thing, “when a bad spirit has risen among us,” for both (or however many) parties to an emerging schism to see themselves as the particularly aggrieved ones. It is natural, as their rhetoric suggests here and there, for those going out to say about themselves, “We are not the ones leaving the church; the church has left us.” And it is natural, as well, as our own rhetoric suggests here and there, for those of us who are witnessing with deep sadness their departure or possible departure, to say, “They are the ones who are not really Reformed.” A schism, after all, is a divorce written large, and the bitterness is natural.

But our polity has steadfastly called upon us to do the unnatural thing, and I have witnessed countless persons vow to do that very unnatural thing just as I have made that vow on several occasions myself. “Will you be governed by our church’s polity, and will you abide by its discipline? Will you be a friend among your colleagues in ministry, working with them, subject to the ordering of God’s Word and Spirit?”

It is not natural. It calls upon us, with God’s help, to be better than any of us are by ourselves.

Tom Are Jr., whom I earlier referenced, was one of the practicing pastors who lectured at the annual MidWinters early this year at Austin Seminary. In his last lecture, Tom dwelt upon how, practically speaking, the prevailing vow at the heart of so many of our church’s debates over the last years and decades has been the one challenging us to keep the peace, unity, and purity of the church. He urged us, though, especially in this season of time, to place our greatest ecclesial emphasis upon being friends among our colleagues in ministry.

“The best part of General Assembly,” Tom said, “is the friendships. But our friendships have coalesced around the ordination question. We all arrive at the Assembly with our team jerseys. Everyone knows who’s on what side. But at the 2010 Assembly during the Middle East Report, the Holy Spirit slipped into the Presbyterian locker room and mixed up all the jerseys. Those whom you previously believed were inspired and faithful were now on the wrong side. And those who for years you have known were missing the boat altogether—they were agreeing with you. It was troubling.”

Tom went on: “But I think it was holy. It is far better when our friendship with one another shapes how we deal with issues, rather than issues determining who our friends are.

“The unity of the church is voiced as a value. That’s a problem. It is not a value; it is a relationship. Love of neighbor is not a principle or even a commitment. It is a moment. It is a shared experience with someone with a name and a need, a personality and a voice. Love is always incarnational. The unity of the church is a relationship. It is a love that sees the face.

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“And it is our mission.”

Speaking for myself, my confession as a party in this possible ecclesial divorce is that, too often in our various arguments, I have not seen the face of that neighbor who is my opponent. I have seen instead an issue, or a party, or a point of view, or even a threat; but not the face. And that one has thus so often easily become the other—a stranger, an enemy, even, but not a friend. Which means that, when our churchly differences lead to schism or its possibility, I am inextricably part of the reason. If “a bad spirit has risen among us,” that spirit dwells within me, too. If there is blood on our hands because of this schism, some of that blood is mine. In the words of that prayer at the beginning of this essay, “a bad spirit has risen among us and set us against [God’s] Holy Spirit of peace and love.”

Of course, this bad spirit is a natural thing. But our mission is to attempt the unnatural thing. “Take from us,” says the prayer, “the mistrust, party spirit, contention, and all evil that now divides us. Work in us a desire for reconciliation, so that, putting aside personal grievances, we may go about your business with a single mind, devoted to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.”

In the spirit of that prayer, in the spirit of our polity at its best, in the Holy Spirit with which God imbues and reinforces us, I end this essay by inviting all of us to practice something which, if we are left to our own devices, is not possible. But because of God’s incarnation in Jesus Christ, I invite us all to resolve once more to practice the unnatural thing that he showed us—an incarnational love, a love that sees the face, a church that is not, finally, an institution, but a set of relationships. “Will you be a friend in ministry?” goes the vow. And over and over again, we have answered, “I will.”

Years ago now, when we had finished that funeral of my first uncle to die, the family walked out across a slight hill—greening with the new grass of early spring and dotted with the blooms of dogwoods—to have a picture taken of all of us, with that old church in the background. When the picture had been taken, my Uncle Leron—a saintly man and a kind of homespun philosopher—put his hand on my shoulder. “Teddy,” he said, “we are your family, and what that means is that we are the only people on earth who love you because we don’t have any choice.”

It was a testimony, of course, to the power of family, and the fact that I remember every syllable of those words to this good day is proof that I took those words to heart. But, technically speaking, that definition of family is rightly extended to our larger and more primary family—the church of Jesus Christ. To us, and to our culture, it is such a battered and disappointing thing—broken and often barely alive. But I believe that, in the mind of God, it is intended to bear the hope of the world. What might it mean for God’s Kingdom if, in this moment, we rehearsed to ourselves that profoundly ecclesial vow—couched as it is in the terms of friendship—and resolved once again to keep it?

9. From Tom Are’s manuscript for the lecture, “What Do We Do Now?” delivered on February 1, 2012, in Shelton Chapel, Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Austin.
10. Book of Common Worship
Stuck with Each Other

Thomas W. Currie

“The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you ...’” - I Cor. 12:21

“For he is our peace ...” - Ephesians 2:14

It is hard to be the church. Like so many other practices of the Christian life—forgiveness, forbearance, prayer, worship, witness, service—being the church takes a miracle. Our mistake, our temptation really, is to think that we could be the church by virtue of something less. It is, for example, easier to be a cause, a movement of like-minded people in service to this or that particular end. An association of like-minded people does not take a miracle. The history of our country is littered with such causes, many of which the church has engendered or supported and some of which have been deeply assimilated to the church’s own life. But causes, even very righteous ones, do not make a church.

Why is being the church so difficult? Ralph Wood, in his recent biography of G.K. Chesterton, notes that when Chesterton was once asked to contribute to a symposium dealing with the question, “What's wrong with the world?” he replied, “I am.”1 Surely, that is at the root of the matter. Our own sinfulness impinges here, too. Indeed, there is something about the audacious attempt to live together as the church that regularly brings out the worst in us, or at least reveals the vicious smallness that otherwise nice people are able to keep under wraps.


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But not even that gets at what is at stake here. Our sinfulness perverts not by making us vicious little sinners but by blinding us to the consequences of our own “principled” actions. The truth of the matter is that we don’t see the problem. Our lack of unity, our lack of interest in unity, our always “principled” splitting apart, the ease with which we become contented or frustrated “denominations,” all of this strikes us as a regrettable if not particularly noteworthy aspect of the American religious scene. As children of the divorce that took place in the 16th century, we have learned to live with its unpleasant consequences, including no longer being scandalized by further splintering in our own day. Why should we, of all people, be surprised? Indeed, such splintering, in the eyes of many, is nothing more than what religious freedom looks like.

In 1939, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, reflecting on his experience of American Christianity, wrote a report entitled “Protestantism Without Reformation.” In that essay he noted the ease with which American Christians celebrated their religious freedom as a freedom without constraint, a self-chosen possibility to worship and live unhindered by political or even confessional restrictions. Suspecting that this notion of religious freedom was simply another form of “cheap grace,” Bonhoeffer concluded that a church that “is free in this way becomes secularized more quickly than a church which does not possess freedom as possibility ... Freedom as an institutional possession is not an essential mark of the church.”

In what then does the freedom of the church consist? For Bonhoeffer the answer had nothing to do with our freedom to enjoy a legally established disestablishment but “the freedom of the Word of God itself to gain a hearing” in our midst. That can happen and has happened in tyrannically oppressive states from Egypt to Babylon to Roman-occupied Palestine, to Nazi Germany, Poland, Soviet Russia, and China in our own day. That freedom is strangely not characterized by the kind of pluralism we often associate with “freedom of expression” or even “freedom of religion.” The freedom of the Word of God Bonhoeffer describes in terms of “constraint,” that is, in terms of an obedience that binds us to one whom we have not chosen and who does not exist simply to bless our ecclesiastical arrangements. This one is Jesus Christ. Whatever freedom is ours as the church is ours in him.

One might conclude from this that Bonhoeffer is simply uttering a kind of piety, reminding American Protestants of the lordship of Jesus Christ even over our denominational differences. But that is not what he is doing in this little paper. In grounding the freedom of the church in the person of Jesus Christ, Bonhoeffer is making explicit the fact that the church’s freedom (and unity) is never something we achieve, never something self-chosen or legally agreed upon. Rather, this freedom is always characterized by the calling of one whom we have not chosen and might not ever choose, whose gift to us we find “constraining” precisely to the extent that it directs us to a life beyond self, a life whose end (telos) is found in Jesus Christ. He is the gift and, just so, he is our “chief end.” To glorify God and to enjoy

3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
Currie

God forever is to find true freedom in following him.

What does this mean? Let me suggest three implications that seem to follow from the “constraining” nature of the church’s freedom and then offer some practical recommendations which might be of use to any who seek to bear witness to the unity that is ours in Jesus Christ.

Constrained in the Company of the Wrong People

W.H. Auden thought it highly unlikely that any of us would have found Jesus attractive on our own terms. Both disciple and Pharisee knew what it was like to be on the receiving end of Jesus’ rebukes, especially when they sought to enlist him in support of their agendas. In so many ways, he was the wrong person, a thought that occurred to both Peter and Judas. Luke and Matthew make it clear, even in their birth narratives, that the child born in Bethlehem was not the Savior the world either wanted or expected. In imaginatively entering the horrific scene of Good Friday, Auden writes: “I see myself as a Hellenized Jew from Alexandria taking an afternoon stroll with a friend, engaged in philosophical argument. Our path takes us near Golgotha. I look up and see a familiar sight, three crosses surrounded by a crowd of onlookers. ‘Really,’ I say, ‘it’s disgusting the way the mob enjoys such things. Why can’t they execute criminals quickly and mercifully by giving them, like Socrates, a draft of hemlock?’ Then,” Auden writes, “I banish the disagreeable spectacle from my mind, and we resume our fascinating discussion about the nature of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful.”5 In another place, Auden writes that if a person is asked why he or she believes in Jesus Christ, he or she can give no better answer than to say, “I believe … because He is in every respect the opposite of what He would be if I could make him in my own image.” Thus, if a Christian is asked: ‘Why Jesus and not Socrates or Buddha or Confucius or Mahomet?’ perhaps all he can say is: ‘None of the others arouse all sides of my being to cry ‘Crucify Him.’”6

Auden’s point is that we are never saved by the one we want, the one we deem suitable for the task, the one we would choose, but rather by one whose freedom to love scandalizes us, “constraining” our agendas, drawing us out of ourselves and into the strange polity of his body. There, “in him” whom we have not chosen, we find ourselves stuck with others whom we have not chosen, but without whom Jesus does not give us himself. To be saved by the wrong person is to be saved in and with the wrong people, a scandal that continues to offend and is regularly displayed in the sacrament of baptism.

The wrong people, of course, are the church. How nice it would be if we could have Jesus without the church, a recurring quest throughout the past 2000 years and one that is very much alive today. But since that seems difficult if not impossible, the next best alternative is to have a church framed in our own image, hip to our own sensibilities, attuned to our particular agendas. That way, whether we be conservative or liberal, evangelical or activist, we can worship and witness with

6. Ibid., 117.
folks like us.

But the wrong person persists in prophetically demonstrating his wrongness by “constraining” us to see the deeply ecclesial nature of his gospel. His gift of himself to us includes the gift of his church. There is simply no head without this body, no Jesus Christ without all those whom he has called. To follow him is to follow him in and with his church. That is where all the wrong people are.

**Life Together in the One Body**

Stated in such a way, one might offer many well-reasoned theological objections. For example, Protestants generally and the Reformed tradition in particular have always been deeply suspicious of the church’s temptation to worship itself. The “Protestant principle” (i.e., the finite should never be absolutized or raised to the level of the infinite) might well be invoked here to remind us of the dangers lurking in a too ecclesial understanding of the gospel. While one must certainly grant the point that the church is always tempted in this respect and has often succumbed to that temptation, one can only wonder if our fervent warnings do not mask a deeper desire to be “un-constrained” by the body, even untainted by its coarse foolishness, un-disciplined by its life together. Could our eagerness to cleanse ourselves of the demons that may in fact lurk here really reflect our desire for a more abstract or “spiritual” body, one that does not so concretely implicate us in the lives of others? Might the “Protestant principle,” itself, be something of an idol? What if the God revealed in Jesus Christ is not the god of some axiomatic separation between finite and infinite, but the God who is to be distinguished from all idols precisely by the extent to which this God comes near, seeking and creating fellowship with us, intruding on our notions of humanity with his “fellow-humanity.” The place where this “fellow-humanity” is embodied and celebrated and proclaimed is the church.

We live in a culture of vast loneliness. *Bowling Alone* describes but one possible way some have attempted to navigate that desert, but in truth the nihilistic emptiness of so much of contemporary life can overwhelm. The virtues of technology have not helped here, but have only exacerbated our growing sense of loneliness and even anger. There may be such things as “virtual” communities but they are bloodless affairs, disembodied realities that neither constrain nor embrace us in any significant way. In such a culture the church, as that life together shaped in the mundane lives membered and re-membered into Christ’s own body, will look increasingly strange and quite out of step with a humanity that has no need of the other.

The church by itself is not the antidote to such loneliness. But the church in its life and witness is the joyfully embodied affirmation that at the heart of reality we are not alone; that we belong to one who has claimed us and called us into a co-

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7. Cf. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/2, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000). “A man without his fellows, or radically neutral or opposed to his fellows, or under the impression that the co-existence of his fellows has only secondary significance, is a being which *ipso facto* is fundamentally alien to the man Jesus and cannot have him as Deliverer and Savior” (p. 227). “Every supposed humanity which is not radically and from the very first fellow-humanity is inhumanity” (p. 228).

Manity, a fellowship, a life together that in its deepest sense is a communion. “This is my body, which is for you,” is not just liturgically memorable or even pastorally kind, but is a profoundly true statement of the human condition. The church is the place where we bear witness to and receive again and again our true humanity, the humanity which, since it comes to us from Jesus Christ, is always a co-humanity, always a life together.

The brokenness which we, in our various quests for purity, so casually ignore is in truth nothing more than the mark of our fallen condition as sinners. What sin does is to separate us from each other, and never more so than in our ecclesiastical arrangements. We have been told for so long of the virtues of “diversity” that it is hardly surprising that we have become blind to our own brokenness, or worse, have learned to celebrate it. The early church fathers, however, saw in Adam’s sin the constitutive alienation of one from the other, an alienation whose “diversity” always justified deeper separations. *Ubi peccata, ibi multitudo* wrote Origen; “Where there is sin, there is multiplicity.”

This separation continued to ramify throughout history resulting in ever deeper divisions. The recapitulation of this history in Christ is precisely the overcoming of these divisions in his own body. The sacrament of communion bears witness to this unity, just as the church is revealed to be the vanguard of that humanity whose unity will one day be made visible in Christ.

**The Triune Koinonia**

One last implication: the worship of the triune God not only draws us into a life together as the worshipping community, but also renders us keenly aware of the brokenness of our body, making us profoundly ashamed and sorry for our sinfully righteous separations. Strangely there is within the triune being of God a kind of diversity that is not at odds with itself, but is characterized by a constant giving and receiving, a sharing of life together, a not-hoarding or counting of status, but a pouring out of life from one to the other. This diversity does not insist on its own way. This diversity rejoices in the life of the other and distinguishes itself not by clinging to the shards of self-interest but by singing together in a harmonious, polyphony of voices. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are and ever live as a life together, not simply as an individual one, or as a collective mass, but being deeply in communion. If the God of Jesus Christ lives in such a communion, would not the corresponding witness to that life be at its heart a life together? Is not the church in all its pathetic brokenness and endless attempts at self-justification still the “natural” witness to that communion that in Jesus Christ has gathered us up into God’s own life? Worshipping the triune God compels us to have done with the earnestness of new separations, the illusion of an acquired purity, the justification of a new denomination.

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Some Practical Recommendations

One of the strengths of the Reformed tradition is its deeply ecumenical character. Calvin wrote his commentaries and his *Institutes* for the whole church, and Calvin and his successors spent a good deal of their time and energy in dialogues and disputation with others, hoping to gain clarity about the faith that was shared in common. Calvin, I would argue, thought of himself as a catholic theologian, one who sought at every moment to bear witness to the unity that is ours in Christ. That is why he worked with other Swiss churches to reach agreement on matters of faith, why he wrote to Cranmer that he would cross ten seas for the sake of Christian unity, why he would not give in to a puritanical “immoderate severity”\(^\text{11}\) that despised the church for its imperfections and failures, further dividing the body. To be nourished by this tradition is to care so deeply for the unity of the church that bearing witness to that unity becomes central to one’s own ministry.

So, perhaps the first thing to be done is to weep. I don’t mean that in a trivial sense or as an emotional response to how awful things are, but as the simple acknowledgement of our own complicity in dividing the body of Christ. Our little causes, always so righteous whether of the left or the right, have a way of becoming little churches (*ecclesiolae*) themselves, such that when we “win,” the church of Jesus Christ always loses and becomes further divided. Until we are bothered by our lack of unity and see it as deeply destructive of the church’s witness, learning to weep may be the only way we learn to pray for the Holy Spirit to heal our brokenness.

But weeping is not enough. Many pastors have had an experience in which they have met with pastors of other traditions where they have been asked to study a text or read a book together. Often in these conversations a pastor in one tradition will discover a deep sense of unity with a member of another tradition, so much so that he or she will feel closer to the one outside his or her own tradition than to others within. This discovery of a measure of unity with others is not a small thing. I would argue that ministers in the Reformed tradition ought to seek out opportunities for such conversations, listening closely to the voices of others who represent parts of the tradition that are both near to us and more distant, finding the gift of Christian unity in some surprising places.

It is true that our denomination is both more and less important as a form of Christian witness. I believe, however, that when the history of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is written, the work of the Theology and Worship Ministry Unit of our denomination will be seen as an enduring and sustaining strength of our church, giving teaching and ruling elders enormous resources for thinking faithfully about the ministry of the church. Those who complain about “Louisville” or denominational failures in leadership would do well simply to read the literature that this particular “ministry unit” has produced over the past twenty years. Truly, our church, through these efforts, has contributed in important ways in helping us

all to discover the unity that is ours in Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{12} Gathering other pastors, interested laypeople, theological students to discuss the occasional papers put out by this division is a step toward cultivating a hunger for Christian unity and witness.

A book that is helpful in this regard is In\textit{ One Body Through the Cross}\textsuperscript{13} edited by Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson. In their proposal for Christian unity, the editors suggest that the ordination of pastors is an appropriate occasion to make visible our unity in Christ. Often these services are seen as a celebration of the ordinand or as simply a denominational matter, but in truth, the person being ordained is being ordained to an office of the whole church. Why not invite representatives from other traditions to participate in this act of the whole church? Why not invite a Lutheran pastor or a Roman Catholic priest, a Methodist layman or Episcopal bishop to join with us in praying for a keener sense of our unity in Christ?

Finally, perhaps most obviously, we should experience worship with other traditions, not in order to assimilate them to our own or to create a mélange of various traditions, but in order to learn the strengths and particular shape of other forms of worship. One result, I believe, will be a deeper appreciation of our own tradition. In addition, however, we will come to see the beauty and power in which the gospel is mediated in other ways, being drawn closer to Jesus Christ and in him to each other.

The issue before us today is whether we can love the church. It gets so little love, and perhaps deserves less than it receives. It is so easily despised, especially for its manifold shortcomings, its weak and timid witness, its halting and vacillating call to discipleship, its own failure to live out what it professes. The church is a clunky thing, not nearly as sexy as a protest movement or as effective as a political campaign or as successful as a product placement. The church has baggage. And in truth, it is not and never will be an end in itself. There is no temple, according to St. John the Divine, in the heavenly city, “for its temple is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb” (Rev. 21:22). But the mystery of the church is that the Lamb is never without his people, never without his bride. The great mystery of the church is that Jesus Christ loves the church. Which is why the new heaven and new earth come to focus in a new Jerusalem, “prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” And it is the voice from the throne that declares that this life is always a life together: “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes” (Rev. 21:3–4).

\textsuperscript{12} To cite but one example of a great gift to the whole church from this General Assembly division, our \textit{Book of Common Worship}, which is as fine a liturgical and theological resource as was produced in the twentieth century.

The Church Faces Schism

What Now?

Barbara G. Wheeler

Last year, the Presbyterian Church voted to remove barriers to the ordination of partnered gays and lesbians. As is often the case when long-contested matters are decided, no one is satisfied. Those who advocated the change know its impact will be limited. The new rules permit congregations and presbyteries to continue to exclude partnered gays and lesbians from leadership if they wish to do so, and many exercise that option. Those who opposed the change are afraid that it will force them to violate their consciences. Some of them hope to find refuge in separate structures in which theirs will again be the majority view. Many Presbyterians were not active as advocates or opponents, but having voted, they are distressed that an issue they are tired of discussing seems still not settled. Amid the continuing dissatisfaction and unrest, two strategies have wide appeal.

First strategy: Fight to the finish. On both sides, small but determined groups believe that their positions on sexuality, ordination, and marriage are what defines the faithfulness of the church. Sooner rather than later, they insist, the whole church must adopt the faithful position. Those who just won one round, now that they have majority support, are considering further steps to open the church to gays and lesbians. They know such measures may be divisive, but they are not afraid of alienating those they have defined as unfaithful. Other small but determined groups, comprised of those who lost the recent vote, are considering separation from a denomination they judge to have stepped off the path of biblical faithfulness. Some want to join other denominations, others to create a new one, and still others are looking for ways to “divide inside,” to create governing bodies of the like-minded within the same ecclesiastical frame. They know that their departure

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will cause painful ruptures, but they believe the faithfulness of the church hangs in the balance.

Second strategy: Forget about it! The “it” in this case is sexuality issues. From left, right, and center come proposals to stop talking about sex and to focus, instead, on the real purpose of the church: mission, proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ to a suffering world. Moderates argue that this can be accomplished within the denomination as it stands, if everyone adheres to the discipline of avoiding the sexuality debate. Some liberals and many conservatives think that the conflict can be quelled only if the sides separate in one of the ways described above. If everyone belongs to a governing body defined by its position on sexuality, there will be within each one general agreement, little need for discussion, and plenty of energy left for mission.

These approaches have some built-in problems. The first is based on the premise that there are only two buckets: faithful and unfaithful. More likely, there is a faithfulness spectrum. Some ideas and practices, are, indeed, better than others, and some are wrong. (I, for instance, am deeply convinced that it is dead wrong and deadly wrong to teach that all same-sex acts and relationships are inherently sinful. Others are convinced that it is dangerously wrong to argue that such acts are acceptable to God.) Wrong is quite a way down the faithfulness spectrum, but it’s not the most extreme pole. That is reserved for matters that have status confessionis: beliefs so deeply erroneous that those who hold them are infidels, not Christians at all.

The experience of most of us who get to know persons who hold what we consider very wrong views is that most of them are Christian. We share one faith, Lord, and baptism. Quite a few, in my own experience, are way more saintly than I am. Further, many of us hold our views unstably—we are closer to the middle than the end of the spectrum. In my time I have seen a lot of change. In my own case, on some issues I have become more open, on others, more orthodox. That change happened not because some person or group anathematized me as unfaithful, but because some person or group provided what Ron Heifetz calls a “holding environment” in which adaptive change can happen. If we want to see further change, we will continue to build cultures in the church that nurture changing hearts and minds. That calls for something much more difficult than fighting to the finish: it requires restraint. Ministry, one of my best students once told me after he had done it for a decade, means staying with people while their hearts change. It takes patience, sometimes holding back from the next forceful action while waiting for others to join in and catch up.

It is worth noting that the most serious damage we do when we adopt a binary view of faithfulness, labeling our convictions “faithful without remainder” and the other side “not faithful at all,” is to ourselves. We believe that our opinions are correct, but some of them may prove not to be. We know that some of our practices are unfaithful, at odds with our beliefs. It’s likely, then, that even if we could rid the church of the “unfaithful” whose views on sexuality are seriously wrong, plenty of error and injustice would remain. We would supply them. And because our opponents would be gone, the level of self-righteousness would be higher—it always is
in homogeneous groups—and that would make the church even less acceptable to God.

The major mistake in the second strategy is the assumption that our teaching and policies on sexuality are not at the heart of mission. Discerning the meaning of the gospel for all of God’s creatures is the mission of the church. The case of GLBT persons is a version of that basic missional challenge that God has put on our plate in our time. What the church teaches about sexuality tells both individuals and the wider society who those persons are as they stand before God. Sexuality is a matter on which the church is required to speak, not an elective conversational topic.

So dropping the subject of human sexuality (whether by a self-imposed gag order, or by internal division into like-minded decision-making bodies, or by so-called gracious separation) is not an option. Our call is to preach the gospel as God has given us light to see it. Preaching and teaching have to be artfully done to be successful. The case must be made in the most persuasive ways possible, so that those who are still unconvinced might actually hear and consider. But in any case, we need to keep at it. Precisely because Presbyterians of sound faith and good character differ so vehemently on sexuality issues, we know God wants us all to stay deeply invested as the church seeks the mind of Christ in this matter.

The two strategies I’ve named are easy to market. Many people respond to the challenge to win at all costs, especially when they are convinced their cause is right and just. Many others hate conflict and can be convinced to pay a very high price for peace. Neither is the way ahead. The path before us is more difficult, and it won’t gather as much immediate support, but it will ultimately prove more satisfying for all of us who long to be the church. Our mandate is to teach the truth and to embrace our opponents, without giving up on either one. Not only do we not have to choose between these goals, but we can’t accomplish one without the other. The whole point of a church is to embrace others in their difference and finitude, as God has embraced us in ours, and to struggle together with them for the gospel, correcting each other in love. Only by sticking to our convictions and sticking with each other, inadequate as we all may be, can we hope to become anything like the body of Christ, given in truth and love for the life of the world.
In John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait, William Bouwsma notes that “one side of Calvin was concerned to relieve the fear of the abyss by means of cultural constructions, boundary systems, and patterns of control that might help him recover his sense of direction” while “another part of him aimed precisely to relieve the pressures with which such human constructions, systems, and patterns constrained and threatened to suffocate him.” In other words, Calvin worried sometimes about the loss of distinctiveness and order (the abyss) and other times about too many restrictions (the labyrinth).

For centuries American Presbyterians have periodically argued among ourselves about whether the dangers of the labyrinth or the abyss—too many restrictions or too little order—were greater threats to the church at a given time. In the last four centuries, we have faced a series of controversies between those who seek to maintain established doctrine and order and those who seek to remove unnecessary and illegitimate restrictions on the freedom of Presbyterians to bear the gospel in new ways for new contexts.

In the mid-eighteenth century, American Presbyterians were divided between an “Old Side” faction, which sought to protect the church from the erosion of its theological distinctiveness by requiring that all ministers affirm the Westminster Confession as the only true and complete summary of what the Bible taught, and a “New Side,” which saw that requirement as an attempt to subject the thoughts and


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actions of Presbyterian ministers to unscriptural and unnecessary restrictions.\(^2\)

In 1809 Cumberland Presbytery ordained four men who had not met all the denomination’s educational requirements for clergy. The Presbytery was subsequently censured by the Synod of Kentucky and, in 1810, it dissolved its relationship with the General Assembly and formed itself into an independent presbytery. Cumberland Presbytery chose to disregard the denomination’s educational requirements for ministers because they thought those requirements restricted its ability to provide leadership for the increasing number of Presbyterian churches on the expanding frontier. The Synod of Kentucky, representing the entire denomination, was concerned to maintain established Presbyterian order.\(^3\)

Theological controversies in the 1830s led to the division of the Presbyterian Church into separate Old School and New School bodies. The abyss-fearing Old School saw the church primarily as the repository of clear and immutable truth and resisted efforts to organize churches or preach the gospel in new ways. The labyrinth-fearing New School viewed the church as an institution called always to bear the gospel in fresh and accessible ways.\(^4\)

The best-known schism among American Presbyterians, between North and South in 1861, was a schism within the Old School Church that had separated from the New School in 1838. Both major factions in the 1861 split were concerned to avoid the abyss. The 1861 Assembly’s adoption of resolutions declaring the allegiance of all Presbyterians to the federal government was motivated by opposition to secession. This Northern majority saw the abyss in the willingness of Southerners to dissolve the Union. Those who withdrew from the denomination and formed the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America declared their obligation to bear witness against abolitionism. They saw the abyss in the willingness of the church to advocate abolition even though the Bible often mentioned but never condemned slavery.

From 1910-1927, the General Assembly faced a series of Fundamentalist/Modernist conflicts. Two of the major figures in that dispute serve to illustrate the extent to which it fits the labyrinth/abyss pattern.

J. Gresham Machen was a professor of New Testament at Princeton Seminary and leader of the conservative, “fundamentalist” wing of the church. He articulated an understanding of the nature of the church in terms of the maintenance and enforcement of correct doctrine and regarded efforts by church members to interpret the Bible based on new scholarship and to articulate and live out Christianity based on those new interpretations as unacceptable and dangerous departures from the church’s established, complete, and sufficient understanding of Christian truth.

Continued on page 31


\(^3\) Ibid, 117.

\(^4\) Ibid., 146-171
Schism:
The Ecclesiastical Quest for Branding

Richard A. Ray

I was looking at a tweed coat some years ago in a store in Dundee, Scotland. When the salesman approached he said that he knew the woman who had woven the material. She did it in her own cottage on some little island off the west coast. He was telling me about proud workmanship and a strong, reliable tradition.

That kind of knowledge has about disappeared. Today we hear mostly of branding and brand names. They are supposed to indicate something about quality. However, in many cases a name brand only rests on the surface, while an unaccountable number of suppliers and manufacturers are entangled underneath. And questions soon begin to arise about the quality.

Is this the way some people feel about the church to which they have belonged? The brand name is there but the dependability is uncertain. They look for a way to leave in order, paradoxically, to regain the solid foundation which they thought they were losing. And some of those who saw no reason to leave were not hesitant to use the old words “schism” and “schismatics” to pin critical brand names on those who were leaving. But the use of such labels seems only to increase the tensions. They clarify little and obscure the more complex factors. What I would like to do is to suggest that the concept of a church “schism” has always been an inadequate, if not harmful, way to address divisions. Its classical roots lie in the ripping or tearing of material goods. And thus, when it is used as a metaphor for complex social and spiritual changes, its limited value tends to end dialogue rather than to invite mutual discovery.

Historians have long written about the “schisms” led by Hippolytus, Novatian, Callistus, and others. And they have sometimes combined with this an admiration for the way in which figures such as Justin, Tertullian, and Irenaeus identified

Richard Ray has served the church in myriad ways: as a pastor, college professor, editor of John Knox Press, seminary professor (Pittsburgh Theological Seminary). Retired now and living in Montreat, North Carolina, he remains active in several theological venues. Ray holds degrees from Dartmouth College, Union Seminary in Virginia, and the University of St. Andrews.
“heresies” and countermanded them. A great deal of intellectual ferment was obviously underway. However, what became the most promising outcome was that early Christian thinkers began to focus explicitly on what they thought of as the “Apostolic Tradition.” This perspective eventually became the unifying core of the creeds and the central criterion for the church’s theology. And the issue of Christology was at the heart of it. It is when people led groups away from this core that they were eventually spoken of as schismatics. In due time those loyal to the Roman church adapted it to criticize the Protestant Reformers.

It is suggestive to see how the Reformers attempted to meet these accusations. Their response generally boiled down to two kinds of arguments. The first was to claim that the separation was defensible because it met certain important criteria. Peter Martyr Vermigli outlined these in his “Loci Communes.” The second argument, however, strikes me as the more subtle. In it Calvin acknowledges that in principle schism is to be deplored. As he says in his Institutes, even scandal is no excuse to leave the church. But then he adds that the Reformers were not the ones to leave. He writes a long letter to Cardinal Sadolet in which he says that the Reformers were more loyal to the scripture and the church fathers. Thus he accuses Rome of leaving the church. He adds to the argument in “The Catechism of the Church in Geneva” by saying that all who remain unrepentant for splitting the unity of the church into schisms are “quite excluded from the hope of salvation.” And in his Decades, Heinrich Bullinger accuses the Catholics of being perfectionists who demand far more in others than they do of themselves. In a phrase that still has a homiletic ring to it, he describes them as being “master-builders in Utopia.”

Each side accused others of schism. Was anything accomplished by all of that? Through the limitations inherent in such concepts, they became locked into worsening confrontation. I suspect that they would have done a lot better if they had turned back to Augustine. With the administrative flair of a bishop, he says in his Discourse on Psalm 8, “For the present time, it so happens that the good are set apart from the bad not by space but by difference of aim, although as far as bodily presence goes they mingle together in the churches.” He could use the word “schism” but his basic advice was, “Therefore, brethren, in the midst of these scandals there is but one remedy: do not think evil of your brother” (Discourse on Psalm 30).

Today denominational loyalists sometimes say that those threatening to leave are schismatics. But those who are becoming restless turn the accusation back and argue, somewhat as did the Reformers, that they are the ones who are the most loyal to the heritage. They claim that they are the ones who maintain a strong,  

reliable theological core. They are loyal to the Apostolic Tradition.

Will we remain at such an impasse? The mutual accusations may label us all schismatics in the end. Our brand name as Presbyterians might live on, but the sure sense of a strong, reliable tradition could have faded away. With some hesitation I have a little suggestion for true brand management.

Here are two interesting figures who might provide direction. One is ancient and the other is contemporary. In the early fifth century Thedoret was called to leave his scholarly retreat to become the bishop of Cyrrhus. Guided by his sense of the Apostolic Tradition and the central importance of Christology, he concluded that the basic problem in his 700 churches was heresy. The antidote would be a strong preaching of the word of God. And when the end of his tenure had come he could declare that the spiritual vitality of the churches had been restored. The focus was as sure as a surgical strike.

Peter Kreeft had been raised in the Dutch Reformed tradition. While he was a graduate student in philosophy at Yale he became a Roman Catholic. He now teaches at Boston College. And at the end of his Fundamentals of the Faith he concludes that “The way from unity to disunity was through the loss of Christ at the center. Therefore the only way back is through Christ as the center, through letting Christ rule our churches completely.”

Could such surprising figures as these become our coaches today? Could they help us to recover the One who is the center of our faith and to discover that in him we no longer have need for “schism” or for our previous concerns for ecclesiastical branding? I wonder if such figures from outside our camps may have been guided here for us.

Further Reflections

From Lemuel García

August 19th, 2011, was a day of great sadness for my family when my father, a retired Presbyterian minister in Mexico, called me to share the news that the General Assembly of the National Presbyterian Church of Mexico had voted to sever its official relationship with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), thus ending a 139-year partnership in mission.

I have always taken pride of being a fourth generation Presbyterian. I grew up hearing and appreciating stories of the men and women of faith who came from the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with our people and who lived among us and became one with us. Last year my family and I had the opportunity to visit a retired PC(USA) mission worker who spent more than thirty years serving in Mexico and Latin America. She influenced many lives, including my mother’s, and on my baptism, “Sarita” (as we affectionately call her) stood next to my mother. When we saw Sarita again after many years she introduced us proudly to her friends as her Mexican family.

My wife and I moved to the United States in 1992 and became members of the PC(USA). We felt we had come to the “Mother” church, and every time we worshipped at a Presbyterian church we knew we were with our family of faith, we were never strangers. Over the years we have been so blessed to be part of joint mission service with Presbyterians on both sides of the U.S.A.-Mexican border. Needless to say, even the thought of separation of our church family caused us a pain and grief hard to bear. But family relationships that have been forged for generations are not easily rent asunder. The legacy and history of those who have contributed to further the reign of God in both countries remains as a testimony of God’s reconciling love.

We are reminded in Ephesians 2 that Christ is our peace and that the dividing wall is torn down. I’m grateful that our source of hope for unity in the body of Christ comes from the Head of the Church himself. I’m also encouraged that while officially there may not be a relationship between our two beloved denominations, “unofficially” our common bond and commitment to bi-national mission with all God’s people may continue through different channels. Our sisters and brothers in Mexico and the United States are already in the process of discerning prayerfully the next possible best way to be faithful to our call to be one in Christ and to continue serving God and neighbor together: “may [we] all be one … so that the world may believe” (John 17:21).

Lemuel García is an associate presbyter in Salem Presbytery, North Carolina. A 1995 graduate of Austin Seminary, García served as chaplain at Presbyterian Pan American School in Kingsville, Texas, and served on the staff of the Synod of the Sun in the area of multicultural ministries.

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Once upon a time, Grace Presbytery planned some regional presbytery meetings. Someone decided to make “The Ordination Question” the topic du jour. Instead of a dry lecture format or an unwieldy number of small groups, however, they thought that pairs of speakers might model dialogue for the presbytery. I was one of eight people chosen to lead these dialogues and met with the Stated Clerk to make plans.

When the group gathered at the presbytery office, we looked around the table and began secretly to measure ourselves against the others who had been chosen for this task. Each of us was known for our ability to articulate an opinion, some of which were foreseeable before we opened our mouths. Quickly we surmised that we had been chosen as much for our polar opposition as for our good looks, quick wit, and charm.

Right after the opening prayer, one of our colleagues had the good sense to say that if we had been brought together for another tiresome display of predictable posturing, he was not interested in taking part. Surprisingly, his “polar opposite” quickly agreed. In short order, the group began to see this event as less an occasion to spar than an opportunity to model for the presbytery a vision for our life together.

I was paired with a pastor whom I knew and with whom I had serious theological differences. We decided to structure our time by first addressing our own stories: the “social location” that provided the lenses through which we viewed the world. Then we each shared some important tenets of our theology. And only then did we begin to address our personal stand on the topic of the day.

I have no idea now whether anyone present that day remembers a word I said. But to this day, even though we cannot agree on much beyond the fact that Jesus is Lord, I count my debate partner as a colleague and friend. What we modeled for the presbytery is what I know to be true: the Presbyterian tent is indeed large enough for us all. When we honestly encounter another person by hearing their story and sharing our own, we begin to understand God’s activity in their life and ours, and can honor their integrity. And while the differences may not disappear, they will take their rightful place toward the back of the line.

Sallie Sampsell Watson, a 1987 graduate of Austin Seminary, is regional presbyter for the Presbyteries of Santa Fe and Sierra Blanca. She has led congregations as pastor and served as a moderator of the Committee on Ministry for Grace Presbytery, commissioner to the General Assembly, president of the Alumni Association board at Austin College, contributing editor to the Presbyterian Outlook, among other service to the Presbyterian Church.
Like many Presbyterian congregations, the membership of First Presbyterian Church in Pasadena, Texas, represents a broad spectrum of theological and political perspectives. With a membership of around 290 souls, this congregation is active in mission—locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally.

In the summer of 2010 I began to serve that church as a temporary supply. By the fall the congregation voted to call me as its designated pastor for a period of two years. Because Amendment 10-A, having to do with a change in the ordination standards of the Book of Order, was to be considered and voted on by New Covenant Presbytery, I thought it would be healthy for interested members to be given an opportunity to read and discuss the issue. I also knew that there were strongly held views on both sides of this issue in the congregation.

So, with the session’s approval I announced two to three consecutive weeks in advance that there would be a “town hall meeting” following worship on a certain Sunday in November. From the very beginning of the announcements I heard little or no response, so I expected no more than seven or eight persons to show up. When about fifty persons came into the fellowship hall, I was stunned.

After I introduced the proposed amendment, the floor was opened for discussion. Some of those present opposed 10-A, but there were also some who clearly favored its passage. And there were many there who were struggling with the issue and simply wanted to listen. Questions were asked about the implications of the proposed change in language. There was an edge to some of the questions and comments. A few tried to defuse some of the tension with good-hearted humor.

The point of the gathering was not to settle anything. Nor was it to make a recommendation to any commissioners that might attend the presbytery meeting where the vote would be held.

The point of the meeting was to give church members an opportunity to hear and discuss an important issue before the church. After the meeting a couple of persons observed that there had been few such occasions in the past. People on both sides simply wanted to be heard.

While somewhat risky for a new pastor, the meeting proved to build a high level of trust. Since the passage of 10-A, some members are pleased with the result.

James S. Currie is pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Pasadena, Texas. He has been a Presbyterian pastor for more than thirty years. With degrees from UT-Austin (BA), Indiana University (MA), Austin Seminary (MDiv, ThM), and Rice University (PhD), he has written The Kingdom of God Is Like ... Baseball: A Metaphor for Jesus’s Kingdom Parables (Cascade Books, 2011) and histories of Austin Seminary and the Presbyterian Pan American School.
while two couples have left the church, more upset with the denomination than with First Presbyterian, Pasadena. More significantly, others who opposed 10-A have either found ways to live with it or have decided that there are more important matters for the church to be about. Still others continue to wrestle with the issue.

I don’t know that this event is evidence of the church transcending (for the sake of the kingdom) serious breaches/differences of opinion. However, I do believe that the Holy Spirit was present and at work in such a way that open and honest conversations regarding an important issue led to ways for the church to be the church in the best possible sense. I have come to love and appreciate this congregation, for its genuine commitment both to Jesus Christ and to his church.

Labyrinth
Continued from page 25

Henry Sloane Coffin, pastor of Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City and professor of pastoral theology at Union Theological Seminary, is associated with the “modernist” wing of the church. He maintained that doctrinal hair-splitting should never be allowed to impede the church’s ability to fulfill its mission in a variety of contexts. Coffin saw the efforts of Machen and others to forbid Christians to produce new ways of articulating Christian truth based on higher biblical criticism as inappropriate restrictions on their ability to bear the gospel in new ways for new situations.5

For nearly 300 years there has been some consistency in the way American Presbyterians have framed arguments about the specific issues of their day. Roughly once per generation, we have had major arguments among ourselves about whether the abyss or the labyrinth was the greater threat facing the church at a particular time.

The recognition of this pattern suggests that the questions currently agitating the church are not unprecedented or cataclysmic. Current conflicts regarding the adoption of Amendment 10-A may be usefully interpreted as new chapters in the ongoing conversation among Presbyterians about whether the labyrinth or the abyss constitutes the greater threat to the church in our time.

A Statement Concerning Jesus Christ, Scripture, the Church, and Human Sexuality

Whereas:

1. We affirm that the “chief end” of all God’s people is “to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever” (Westminster Confession), and we confess that we often act in ways that diminish that glory and joy.

2. We affirm that, “In Christ, by the power of the Spirit, God sends the Church into the world to share the gospel of God’s redemption of all things and people... The Church strives to be faithful to the good news it has received and accountable to the standards of the confessions. The Church seeks to present the claims of Jesus Christ, leading persons to repentance, acceptance of Christ alone as Savior and Lord, and new life as His disciples.” (Book of Order F-1.0302d), and we confess that our sources of authority are, first of all, Jesus Christ, the Scriptures as the inspired word of God, our confessions, and then the Book of Order.

3. We affirm that the Church is fundamentally instituted by Jesus Christ to proclaim the gospel, in word and in deed, and we confess that proclamation and mission are seriously diminished and threatened by divisive controversies within the Church.

4. We affirm that our primary relationship with Jesus Christ is formed by the Scriptures as revealed by the Holy Spirit, and we confess that even when we diligently seek to be formed by Scriptures as revealed by the Holy Spirit, we may come to hold different convictions about issues.

5. We affirm that each of us is unique in God-given skills and abilities, in acquired perceptions and beliefs, while at the same time united as the body of Christ, and we confess that in times of controversy we focus on our differences to the detriment of our unity.
Schism and the Church

6. The Book of Order of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) (its governing constitution) G-2.0104b states:

“Standards for ordained service reflect the church’s desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life (G-1.000). The governing body responsible for ordination and/or installation (G-14.0240; G-14.0450) shall examine each candidate’s calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability for the responsibilities of office. The examination shall include, but not be limited to, a determination of the candidate’s ability and commitment to fulfill all requirements as expressed in the constitutional questions for ordination and installation (W-4.4003). Governing bodies shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates.”

We acknowledge that differing responses to G.20104b in the Book of Order threaten to divide the Church, and we confess that we are helpless without the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

7. We acknowledge that standards for ordained service in the Church have been changed to eliminate specific language related to human sexuality, and instead speak of “joyful submission to the Lordship of Christ in all aspects of life,” but we confess that we have differing convictions regarding what it means to submit to Christ.

8. We acknowledge that First Presbyterian Church of Atlanta is a diverse body of believers with differing views, including those concerning human sexuality, and we confess that while some are rejoicing with the change in standards for ordained service, others are grieving over it.

9. We acknowledge that positions and rationales of those of different convictions have validity and merit, but we confess that we often fail to love those of different convictions or to discern the common ground between us necessary for reconciliation and healing.

10. We acknowledge the calling of First Presbyterian Church of Atlanta to hold “Christ at the Center,” as we are a congregation leaning neither to the left nor the right, but we confess that finding “Christ at the Center” during this time will come only through the power of the Holy Spirit, guiding each of us to “speak the truth in love.” (Ephesians 4: 15).

Therefore:

a. We, the members of the Session of First Presbyterian Church of Atlanta, will seek to provide leadership by abiding by the Book of Order—both in its current form and in its processes for change—and by working diligently for the peace and unity of the church.
b. We, the members of the Session, will strive diligently to carry forth the command to proclaim the gospel and to uphold the peace and unity of the Church and not be diverted or divided by controversy over the standards for ordination.

c. We call upon all members of Sessions, Presbyteries, General Assemblies, judicatories and all special interest groups to prayerfully and earnestly seek to discern the will of God for the Church, and to do so within the framework of our established polity.

d. We call upon all members of First Presbyterian Church of Atlanta and the PC(USA) to treat each other as Christians and not to label those who differ as somehow less committed to our Christian faith.

e. We call upon all members of First Presbyterian Church of Atlanta to welcome everyone to the worship, life, fellowship and ministries of our congregation.

f. We commit to finding creative ways to make space for one another in order to remain a diverse yet unified body of believers, and we humbly ask for the guidance of the Holy Spirit as we learn to live together, love one another, and be reconciled to each other in the midst of these changes.

*The “fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”* (Galatians 5:22 NRSV)
Economist Raghuram G. Rajan argues in his recent book, *Fault Lines*, that the rising income inequality in the United States served as a major factor in our current economic crisis. However, the inequality is not simply between the 1-percentile income earners and the 99-percentile income earners. Rather, the discrepancy is also in the 90/50 income distribution split where, since the 1980s, the “wages of workers at the 90th percentile of the wage distribution in the United States—such as office managers—have grown much faster than the wage of the 50th percentile worker (the median worker)—typically factory workers and office assistants.”¹ Rajan recognizes that numerous factors contribute to the growth in the 90/50 differential. However, the primary factor is poor education. The technological progress experienced in the United States over the past three decades requires a workforce with a broader knowledge base and deeper skill-sets. Fewer and fewer viable job options are available for people without an undergraduate degree, and in many instances, even for office workers, an undergraduate degree is barely


sufficient. The education system, argues Rajan, has been unable to provide enough of the labor force with the tools needed to advance in this technologically driven economy. Dysfunctional primary and secondary schools leave too many Americans unprepared for college.

Middle-class Americans experienced this educational deficiency through stagnant paychecks and job insecurity. But, according to Rajan, the more fundamental deficiency was in leadership or the political response to rising inequality. Instead of understanding the problem in the American economy as one of income disparity, and therefore a real need to improve American’s quality of education, politicians couched the problem in terms of consumption. “Stripped of its essentials, the argument is that if somehow the consumption of middle-class householders keeps up, if they can afford a new car every few years and the occasional exotic holiday, perhaps they will pay less attention to their stagnant monthly paychecks.” In order to facilitate the broader objective of increasing consumption, politicians extended easy credit to households, mainly through the expansion of home ownership.

Over the past decade American citizens were introduced to a host of financial innovations that were lauded as the answer to making home ownership a very real possibility for every American family. Aspiring homeowners were given access to capital and presented with financing choices but denied the opportunity to understand why certain choices were poor ones. Incentivized by investment innovations such as debt swaps, credit and commodity derivatives, hybrid securities, and collateralized mortgage obligation derivatives, mortgages were structured in such a way that made default inevitable. Mortgage packages were so incredibly sophisticated and difficult to comprehend that applicants were often encouraged simply to trust the professionals. Applicants were unable to internalize the full consequences of their decisions and were encouraged to undertake loans they simply could not afford. Rajan concludes, “when easy money pushed by a deep-pocketed government comes into contact with the profit motive of a sophisticated, competitive, and amoral financial sector” a great stress builds in our economy and creates tears in our social fabric.

President Barack Obama, in his 2012 State of the Union speech also tied income inequality to educational reform. The defining issue of our time, he maintained, is how to keep alive the “basic American promise that if you worked hard, you could do well enough to raise a family, own a home, send your kids to college, and put a little away for retirement.” President Obama went on to describe our defining issue as one of income inequality. “We can either settle for a country where a shrinking number of people do really well, while a growing number of Americans barely get by. Or we can restore an economy where everyone gets a fair shot, everyone does their fair share, and everyone plays by the same set of rules.” Moreover, the president challenged Americans to address the seriousness of income inequality and its detriment to our social stability by investing in America’s educational

2. Fault Lines, 8.
3. Ibid., 8-9.
4. Ibid., 157-158.
5. Ibid., 9.
infrastructure. Investing in education will ensure an economy that is competitive enough to support a strong middle class and vigorous enough to create jobs and living wages for the most economically vulnerable citizens in our society.

The president proposed six general educational areas on which he suggested we focus: 1) a national commitment to partnerships between community colleges and businesses; 2) a renewed commitment to the training, development, and compensation of teachers; 3) a requirement that all students stay in high school until they graduate or turn eighteen; 4) an extension of the college tuition tax credit and doubling the number of work-study jobs in the next five years; 5) a mandate for colleges and universities to halt tuition hikes or experience a decrease in their federal funding and; 6) a national commitment to working on comprehensive immigration reform and/or an agreement to “stop expelling responsible young people who want to staff our labs, start new businesses, and defend this country.”

Our world is exploding with technological advances. New jobs, new products, and new services are created every day. This is exciting. But, as Tom Friedman argues, “With each advance in globalization and the IT revolution, the best jobs will require workers to have more and better education.”\(^6\) Consider the latest unemployment rates from the Bureau of Labor Statistics for Americans over twenty-five years old: those with less than a high school degree, 13.8 percent; those with a high school degree and no college, 8.7 percent; those with some college or associate degree, 7.7 percent; and those with bachelor’s degree or higher, 4.1 percent. Friedman pushes the president’s proposals on education a step further. He advocates for passing some kind of G.I. Bill for the 21st century that ensures every American has access to post-high school education.\(^7\)

I don’t know if each of President Obama’s (or Friedman’s) specific proposals will gain traction. Neither am I certain that these ideas are the most effective for improving and expanding the educational opportunities of America’s citizens. But, I am hopeful that the push to imagine education as both an “economic imperative” and an essential factor in shaping an American corporate mind-set that believes, in the words of Thomas Friedman, that “average is over” moves us closer to reclaiming a more balanced socio-economic reality. However, while I am hopeful, I am not naïve. A deep divisive unpleasant split, a schism, marks America’s cultural climate (if not among the general population, certainly among our elected officials). If feels like we are in a boxing match and each opponent is determined to score a TKO. Each opponent is well trained in the classic boxing technique—jab and move. The result? Well, Democrats want to be heard, but fail to listen. Republicans expect their points to be observed, while simultaneously ignoring others’ perspectives. Yes, we are caught in the midst of a good-old-fashioned ideological brawl. We should embrace the fight. But, there is a difference between fighting to break-up and fighting to make-up.

We are fighting to break-up. The schism that exists in our country prevents Congress from acting in the national interest. Reasons for Americans’ polarization

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7. Ibid.
and subsequent political immobilization vary. Some schools of thought emphasize the digital nature of our public discourse and its negative impact on conflict resolution. A few weeks ago, one of my students forwarded me an article, and its argument suggests that actual biological difference, rather than simply ideological difference, explains why so-called liberals and conservatives view the world so differently. Still other social theorist maintain that basic civility, “the civil treatment of others and respect for their sensibilities ... are thought to be diminishing.” I can’t say for certain if any of these theories (and certainly a myriad of others) is a valid cause for the charged environment in which we exist. However, I agree with Jeffrey Immelt, the CEO of General Electric, “What we lack in the U.S. today is the confidence that is generated by solving one big, hard problem together.”

Decreasing the level of income inequality cannot be imagined as simply a Democratic or Republican value. Rather, it is an American value that requires comprehensive educational reform. And it must be addressed by utilizing the combined gifts of each political party, of business owners, of religious groups, of educators and administrators, and of parents and students. Instead of merely fighting over big government or limited government, unfettered free-markets or stricter regulatory measures, let’s broaden the battle/conversation and narrow the focus. Let’s fight to make-up and figure out how a more efficient government and more dynamic business incentives can create an environment that privileges quality education and transformative research. So, instead of fighting against one another, let’s fight for one another. Instead of exercising our talents to draw further attention to issues that divide us, let’s stretch our imaginations and solve one big, hard problem— together.

Fighting to make-up does, however, require ground rules. In the New Testament, the Greek word agon (or one of its derivatives) is often translated as “fight.” Agon connotes a competition, contest, or an intense struggle against opposition. The term is mainly used in Pauline literature and carries five motifs of thought. I offer four of these motifs as framing posts that shape the tone, character, and purpose of our fight. First, agon expresses the goal that can be reached only with the full expenditure of all our energies. For instance, according to Paul, the work of the gospel is more than the daily fulfillment of a duty; it is a fight (an agon), a tense exertion, a passionate struggle, a constantly renewed concentration of forces on the attainment of the goal (see Col. 1:29). Second, the term emphasizes openness to the ideas, needs, and gifts of others. If a person is not ready to set aside her egotistic needs, desires, claims, and reservations, she is not fit for the fight (see 1 Cor. 9:19-27). Third, agon reminds us that sustained commitment to the fight does not diminish the fact that we are in a battle. The concept carries the thought of obstacles, dangers, and catastrophes through which believers must fight their way (see

Finally, the supreme goal for which we fight and work and struggle is not our own salvation alone; it is the salvation of the many (see Col. 4:12-13; Col. 1:28-29).  

Income inequality is an enemy worth fighting against and quality education is a reality worth fighting for. We can create an environment where everyone has access to a quality education, but the individual enters the fight for education. Education imparts knowledge. It offers intellectual, moral, and social instruction. It provides training in or information on a particular field or topic. On the other hand, in its purest sense, educate means “to draw out” or “to lead out.” The individual chooses to participate in receiving knowledge and in drawing out the genius of others. Individuals, in relationship with the broader community, identify and develop their unique contribution to the world; individuals draw out and help develop the unique contributions of others. Education equips us with a broader knowledge base and deeper skill-sets that better help us negotiate our technologically driven economy. Education also nurtures our higher instincts and insists we demonstrate our individual excellence in ways that create a world we have reason to value—education invites us to invest in the world in ways that ensure future generations have opportunities to flourish. The fight to make-up represents a call for “civil solidarity” in the sense that it is an essential virtue “that implies our recognition of the humanity of self and others and a willingness—based on an awareness of mutual dependency—to develop communality with others.” The fight to educate America’s citizens is a fight for communality and therefore requires individual fortitude and communal effort. It requires commitment, persistence, vision, courage, humility, and above all a passion for the common good.


The Church Faces Schism

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