



Price H. Gwynn III, Moderator of the 202nd General Assembly (1990) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), is the son and grandson of Presbyterian ministers, and became a successful businessman as well as an extremely effective elder of the Presbyterian Church. Prior to his election as moderator,

this North Carolina native was vice-president and director of Lance, Inc., having previously served as president of two other major companies. After being elected, Gwynn became the only moderator of our denomination to be featured in *The Saturday Evening Post* for his extensive business experience. Such experience prepared him to serve as chairman of the board of Presbyterian Publishing Corporation during an important time of transition.

His experience and leadership at all levels of the Presbyterian Church are equally impressive. Gwynn has served as deacon, elder, Sunday school teacher, synod representative, and has held extensive presbytery committee assignments, as well as acting as moderator of his presbytery. He was awarded five honorary degrees from Presbyterian colleges, including Davidson, where he also served on the board of trustees. During his distinguished career, he chaired the board of Presbyterian Hospital in Charlotte, and he is an active member of the board of trustees of Union Theological Seminary in Richmond.

Further national church leadership roles include former membership on the General Assembly Council and the Committee on the Spiritual Welfare of the Church. He is currently a member of the Special Committee for Review of the General Assembly. Gwynn has combined all of these activities with a distinguished military career, outstanding civic service, and, with his wife Katherine, strong family ties with their three sons and grandchildren.



Dear Presbyterian Leader:

I am very pleased to send you the second volume in the Price H. Gwynn III Church Leadership Series from the Presbyterian Publishing Corporation (PPC).

This series of publications is intended to honor one of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s most distinguished leaders, a committed Presbyterian Christian who has provided extraordinary leadership to his denominational publishing house and to the PC(USA) as a whole. As you can see from the résumé of his ecclesiastical service, Price Gwynn has served the PC(USA) at all levels. He is one of our denomination's greatest treasures.

It is the hope of PPC's board of directors and staff that these publications will edify and inspire you in your particular situation of ministry. They are intended to celebrate the life and work of Price Gwynn, but also to foster more effective leadership within the PC(USA).

PPC is sending this publication to you free of charge. If, however, you would like additional copies, please send \$1.00 for each copy, to cover shipping and handling, to Customer Service, Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 100 Witherspoon Street, Room 2040, Louisville, KY 40202-1396.

On behalf of Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, please accept this publication with our best wishes!

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Davis Perkins". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized "D" and "P".

Davis Perkins
President & Publisher

Our Family Traditions

Thomas W. Gillespie



OUR FAMILY TRADITIONS

Cartoonist Charles Schulz provides insight as well as humor through the characters featured in his comic strip *Peanuts*. Consider this exchange between Charlie Brown and Linus.

“It happened again last night,” Charlie comments to his little friend as they walk along.

As they lean over a stone wall together, he explains, “Whenever Mom and Dad come home, as soon as they pull into the driveway, Mom says, ‘Home again, Finnigin.’”

“Home again, Finnigin?” Linus asks quizzically.

“Gramma used to say it, too,” Charlie adds.

Then, in the next three frames, Charlie Brown waxes eloquent.

“All families have traditions. Some of them always go to the mountains in the summer. Some families always go to Hawaii for the holidays. Some families always have a big dinner on Sunday. Some families always go to the opera on opening night. All families have traditions.”

In the final frame, with his head in his hands, he comments ruefully, “Our family says, ‘Home again, Finnigin.’”

All families *do* have traditions, exciting or otherwise. Church families have traditions, too, and we Presbyterians are no exception. This essay is about our family traditions, about the role they play in our life of faith, and about the hope they offer for the future. It is written in honor of one who personifies so much of the best in our Presbyterian way of being Christian. Price H. Gwynn III, businessman and churchman, is the epitome of the “ordained layman” (an oxymoron in other traditions)—the Presbyterian elder who shares in church governance and who, in this case, served as Moderator of the 202nd General Assembly (1990) and then chaired the board of the Presbyterian Publishing Corporation during the crucial time of its beginnings. Moreover, his personal roots in an area of our national communion where tradition is particularly recognized and respected make the topic of this tribute especially appropriate.

A PROMISING PAST

We begin with an important distinction between tradition and traditionalism. Jaroslav Pelikan defines *tradition* as “the living faith of people now dead” and *traditionalism* as “the dead faith of people now living.” Tradition is ancestral testimony to the faith that lives on in those who presently stand in it and

believe because of it. Further, tradition is the memory of the past that directs living faith into the future. “Faith hopes for the future it remembers,” as Douglas John Hall puts it. This profound biblical theme is heard, for example, in the words of the prophet of God to the people of God during their Babylonian captivity.

Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness,
You that seek the LORD.
Look to the rock from which you were hewn,
and to the quarry from which you were dug.
Look to Abraham your father
and to Sarah who bore you;
for he was but one when I called him,
but I blessed him and made him many.
(Isaiah 51:1–2, NRSV)

Israel in bondage—deprived of king and priesthood, of palace and temple—was to keep faith alive without any of its accustomed cultural supports by remembering the promise of God grounded in the origin of its tradition—the covenant with Abraham and Sarah. The Israelites’ present bondage was merely episodic in a history determined and directed by the covenantal purpose of God. For all who live in that tradition, the message then and now is: *If you read the past as promise, you may look to the future in hope.* Such is the thesis of this reflection on our Presbyterian family traditions.

Although replete with examples of its perils, our tradition is also filled with promise. Attending to that promise is not a futile exercise in recovering a lost pristine past, but rather the fruitful discipline of listening to the voices of those now dead whose witness keeps the promise alive and encourages us to live in hope toward the future. Given the beating that the very notion of *tradition* has taken from both church and culture over the past four hundred years, however, the credibility of such a proposal (to read the past as promise) depends on how the reasons for the attack on tradition are assessed. The critique has three historical sources.

Protestant Conviction

Whereas tradition functioned in Roman Catholicism on a par with the Scriptures as a source of authoritative Christian doctrine and practice, the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century subordinated tradition to Scripture. The slogan *Sola scriptura* (only Scripture), however, signaled the critique of tradition but not its abandonment. The Reformers recognized

that the message of canonical Scripture was mediated through ecclesial tradition. Distortions and accretions required correction and elimination, but the tradition itself served as both the necessary mediator of Scripture and the authentic interpreter of its theological themes. The Reformers understood these twin tasks as their own. As Calvin wrote in his *Defense against Pelagius*, “Our constant endeavor, day and night, is not just to transmit the tradition faithfully, but also to put it in the form we think will prove best” (60.6, 250). Faithful transmission entailed the privileged position of Scripture in the critical appropriation of tradition, of course, and the best form depended upon appropriateness of expression in the immediate context. But the role of tradition as mediator and interpreter of Scripture was never in doubt, leading some scholars to describe the Reformation as the Protestant reinterpretation of the Catholic tradition.

Over time, particularly in American Protestantism, this carefully nuanced distinction of the Reformers between Scripture and tradition was lost. Tradition became not merely subordinate but irrelevant to Scripture. Even confessional communions, such as our own, were exposed to a naive biblicism. Protestant piety encouraged the devotional reading of Scripture, for example, which easily became an exercise in leaping from the present time of the reader into the past time of the text and back again without any appreciation of the role tradition plays in bonding the Bible and the believer.

The lyrics to a well-known church school song illustrate the issue:

Jesus loves me,
This I know,
For the Bible tells me so.

Professor George Hendry taught my seminary class a Scottish version of the same rhyme with a modest but important corrective:

Jesus loves me,
This I know,
For my mother told me so.

In point of fact, both versions are true—at least to my own experience. Long before I could read anything, much less the Bible, my mother (and father) told me of the love of God in Jesus Christ for all people. Over the years that message was reinforced by church school teachers, youth workers, and pastors. That message is derived from the Scriptures, of course, but it is ever mediated by the living voices of the church.

These voices, some more articulate and informed than others, others more sophisticated and educated than some, represent the interpreters of the Bible who *tradition* (verb) the faith from generation to generation. Collectively over time, their witness makes possible for us that tradition which Pelikan designates “the living faith of people now dead.”

Enlightenment Assumptions

If tradition was subordinated to the Scriptures by the Protestant Reformation, it was made suspect in principle by the Enlightenment of the seventeenth century. *Sola scriptura* gave way to “Think for yourself” (Kant), the watchword of the dawning Age of Reason. The implication was that a rational human being believes nothing on the basis of tradition, particularly if it is religious and claims authoritative status. Tradition was written off as the prejudice of the past that distorts the quest for truth and therefore must be eliminated from the reasoning process. Every knowledge claim of the past was required to undergo examination in the court of *reason*, located in the mind of the individual.

Two assumptions informed the Enlightenment: (1) Reason is a universal human phenomenon, the same for all people at all times and in all places without regard to historical, cultural, racial, ethnic, or gender differences; (2) Reason functions without presuppositions in its quest for knowledge and is therefore independent of tradition. In the eighteenth century the Age of Reason gave way to the Age of Science. In spite of their respective differences in philosophical dispositions, these Enlightenment assumptions lived on in claims regarding a universally valid scientific method unconditioned by temporal, cultural, or other human differences, and in that method’s claim to an objectivity free from presuppositions stemming from tradition. Until recently, these assumptions have gone unexamined and therefore unchallenged.

Enter now Hans-Georg Gadamer. In his magnum opus, *Truth and Method*, this twentieth-century German philosopher examines the assumptions of the Enlightenment and finds them wanting. It is Gadamer’s persuasive argument that all human thinking occurs within the stream of human tradition—be it linguistic, social, or intellectual—and that the view of tradition as the prejudice of the past is itself the uncritical prejudice of the Enlightenment against prejudice. Human thought is simply tradition-bound, meaning that all thinking about anything begins with prejudices about the subject matter (Gadamer calls them *prejudgments*) provided by

the tradition in which we live. All claims to pure objectivity in either rational thinking or scientific experimentation are simply false. Science itself has a tradition, including assumptions as well as prejudices, which inform its investigations, as Thomas Kuhn documents in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Thus, according to Gadamer's critique, tradition is in principle like the air we breathe. We cannot think—or believe—without it.

Postmodern Suspicion

More recently other voices have been raised in protest against the assumptions of the Enlightenment, particularly its monolithic view of rationality. Reflecting more a mood than a movement, these criticisms of the so-called modern (Enlightenment) project have been dubbed “postmodern.”

What they have in common is a deep suspicion of the claim that human rationality is a stable and universal phenomenon unaffected by gender identity, social location, and racial or ethnic differences. Reason is here viewed as expressing itself in a great variety of rationalities of equal validity. What postmodernism shares with the Enlightenment, however, is its suspicion of tradition. As history is written predominantly by the winners of the human struggles it reports—and thereby reflects their perspectives to the exclusion of those of the losers—so tradition is viewed as the product of the victors in the cultural wars, who are by definition the oppressors of the vanquished. The intellectual tradition of Western civilization, for example, is attacked by feminist critics for its implicit and inherent patriarchal bias. The same criticism is made of the church's theological tradition (including the Scriptures). Tradition is here brought before the court of human *experience*—specifically that of women, racial and ethnic minorities, the poor and the oppressed. Only those things in the tradition which give promise of social and political liberation are considered reclaimable.

Whatever the merits of this critique, however, it cannot escape the necessity of tradition in human thinking. French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, for example, notes that strictly speaking we cannot share our personal experiences. What we can share with one another is the *meaning* of our experience. But experience is meaningless until it is interpreted, and it can be interpreted only by using the language afforded by tradition. This does not imply that tradition is beyond criticism; only that our experience, whatever it may be, is dependent upon tradition for its meaning.

The sum of the matter is that in spite of the criticisms leveled against tradition by the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and postmodernism, tradition itself cannot be escaped. It is to us what the ocean is to the fish that swim in it. Unlike fish, however, we do not live in our milieu uncritically. The critical issue of the criterion by which we critically appropriate some traditions and discard others—be it Scripture, reason, experience, or some other—remains unresolved.

My point, however, is that the inescapable reality of tradition makes our particular ecclesial traditions worthy of consideration. Perhaps one way of discerning the validity and value of traditions is to listen for the promise of the future they offer. Like Israel in Babylonian captivity, we may “look to the rock from which [we] were hewn, and to the quarry from which [we] were dug” in order to hear afresh the promise of our Presbyterian family tradition.

A TRADITION REFORMED

Because the Presbyterian Church has never considered its way of being Christian as the only authentic one, it has understood itself in this country as one denomination among others rather than an exclusive sect. Consequently, among our traditions are some shared with our extended family in the one holy catholic and apostolic church, and others shared only with our more immediate cousins in the churches of the so-called Reformed tradition. The term *Reformed* refers to one of the three major movements that emerged from the Protestant Reformation, the others being the Lutheran and the Anabaptist. It is, in fact, shorthand for the holy catholic church *reformed according to the Word of God*, a self-designation which demonstrates that these Reformers—Zwingli, Calvin, Bucer, and others—understood themselves as catholic Christians who intended to reinterpret the church’s tradition in accordance with the Scriptures in their central witness to Jesus Christ as illumined by the Holy Spirit. It is this intention that gives the Reformed tradition its identity as well as its continuing task.

The reformation of the church, accordingly, is not an event buried in the sixteenth century but the ongoing challenge of all communions that identify themselves as Reformed churches. Thus our motto: *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*—“the Church reformed, always *being* reformed” by the Word of God.

Churches of the Reformed tradition are characterized by (a) what they believe (as stated publicly in confessions of faith

and catechisms), (b) how they worship (as attested by directories for worship, liturgies, and hymnals), and (c) how they are governed (as prescribed by books of church order or polities). It is possible therefore to speak of a Reformed *confessional* tradition, a Reformed *liturgical* tradition, and a tradition of Reformed *polity*—the latter being denoted by the term *Presbyterian* (governed by elders). Each of these traditions, however, is theologically informed. In the remainder of this essay we will look at the influence of both internal and external forces that have influenced and continue to impinge upon our tradition as a whole.

On these shores, the Reformed tradition has developed in ways that give it a distinctively American stamp. The history of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) attests to this dramatically. In *The Forming of an American Tradition*, Leonard J. Trinterud demonstrates that the tensions and divisive forces which threaten our church at the close of the twentieth century have been with us since colonial times. His point is that the very tradition that unites us as a family of faith also has tendencies within it which make it difficult for us to keep the family together. George Marsden, in an introductory chapter to *Reformed Theology in America*, edited by David Wells, specifies these tendencies by identifying three theological currents in the stream of our tradition which, although not mutually exclusive, contribute to disunity when played off against one another. I will take them up under the rubrics of *confessionalist*, *conversionist*, and *culturalist* Presbyterian theological dispositions.

A Confessionalist Current

Reformed churches are virtually confessional communions by definition. Whether their geographic origins were in Switzerland, Germany, France, Scotland, or the Netherlands, Reformed churches have identified themselves by the confessions of faith, catechisms, and theological declarations which they have respectively prepared and adopted as public statements of how they understand the witness of the Scriptures to the Christian faith. A number of these are included in our own *Book of Confessions*, which represents that part of the confessional tradition officially acknowledged by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The variety here distinguishes the Reformed from the Lutheran tradition, for example, which is also confessional but oriented to the Augsburg Confession alone. Reformed churches have understood confessing the faith as a continuing and contextual responsibility.

Some view the diversity of this tradition as an implicit admission that no confessional document can claim universal authority. There is truth to this observation. Churches of the Reformed tradition have continued to adopt new confessional documents, in part because changing times and circumstances have required fresh statements of the faith, as well as because the church's reading of the Scriptures produces new insights and understandings of their central message. But this does not detract from the theological principle that Christian faith is a substantive matter that calls for public acknowledgment and thereby makes the church inherently a confessional body. As my teacher Paul Lehmann observed in a class lecture, there is an important difference between *Presbyterian belief* and *the belief of Presbyterians*. What individual Presbyterians may believe is a matter of personal decision, but what the community of faith believes is a matter of corporate decision made in the official adoption of confessional documents. It is this communal understanding which enables the church to be united in its worship and its mission. So, no matter what the shelf life of a particular confessional document may be, it is a necessary statement in its time and place of the common faith that unites the people of God and thereby contributes to the shaping of the confessional tradition out of which the church lives.

What drives this confessionalist tendency of Presbyterians is our historic commitment to love the Lord our God with our *minds* as well as our hearts and souls, in obedience to the first and great commandment (Matthew 22:37). It is grounded in the conviction that Jesus Christ is the *truth* as well as the way and the life (John 14:6). And it is energized by the confidence that the Spirit of God is given to the church "in order that we may understand the [redemptive] gifts bestowed on us by God" (1 Corinthians 2:12). The assumption is that God does not play games with us, and that therefore (1) the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments attest authentically to God's revelation to ancient Israel and to believers in Jesus Christ; (2) this central witness is ultimately intelligible and coherent despite the great diversity of literary genres and theological perspectives included in the Bible; and (3) the church is called to confess intelligently the message it is given to proclaim faithfully and to live obediently. What may be called our quest for common belief (*orthodoxy?*) is generated by the desire to have our corporate theological head screwed on as correctly as possible in order that the church may both worship and witness *in accordance with the Word of God*.

The confessionalist current in our stream of tradition imperils the unity of the church when attempts are made to freeze the tradition at a point in time. The end result has been a tendency to neglect it all the time. This occurred with regard to the magisterial Westminster Confession of Faith, together with its accompanying Shorter and Larger Catechisms. A product of seventeenth-century English Puritanism, the Westminster Confession was adopted by the Church of Scotland and brought to the American colonies by the early Presbyterian immigrants. From the time of its official recognition by the Presbyterian Church in this country, however, it was a source of tension and ultimately of division because it contained theological affirmations (such as the doctrine of double predestination) that made a strict subscription to it impossible for many ministers and elders. Two schisms occurred in the eighteenth century and another in the nineteenth over the subscription issue. Each time the division was eventually healed, but the underlying issue of how loosely or firmly the ordained officers of our church should hold to our Confession remains to this day unresolved. This is so, despite the fact that the denomination has twice revised its confessional stance in the second half of this century (adopting the *Confession of 1967* in the context of the *Book of Confessions*, and more recently adding the *Brief Statement of the Reformed Faith*). Many have concluded from this state of affairs that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is defunct no longer a confessional communion.

This benign neglect of our confessional tradition, however, is equally perilous to the unity of the church, as our present situation more than adequately attests. Denying the possibility or even desirability of common belief compels the church to look elsewhere for its unifying ground, such as oneness in mission, or the Great Ends of the Church, or agreement on social issues. Such alternatives beg the question, however. Each is theologically informed and therefore depends upon theological consensus for its unifying power. Whether consensus on such matters can be achieved by a community of faith that is unable or unwilling to appropriate the promise of its confessional tradition is at best doubtful. This dilemma is the product of our history, having its origins in the emergence of, first the conversionist, then the culturist currents in our family tradition.

A Conversionist Current

In *The Identity of Christianity*, Stephen Sykes reminds us of the “inwardness” tradition that also characterizes the church of

Jesus Christ, with its roots deep in the Scriptures (particularly the Psalms). What this signifies is suggested by the biblical metaphor of the *heart*, which serves in the Bible as a unifying symbol for the emotional, intellectual, and volitional aspects of human being. Because the Word of God addresses us *inwardly* in our hearts, it appeals to our affections as well as our mind and will. This emphasis entered the stream of our American Presbyterian tradition as the *conversionist* current through the Great Awakenings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Conversionist and confessionalist dispositions inevitably hardened into church parties, designated serially as the New Lights and the Old Lights, the New Side and the Old Side, and finally the New School and the Old School. The *new* emphasis was upon *experiential* faith. Not that the inwardness tradition was here played off against sound doctrine. Piety ran deep in the Old School, just as orthodoxy characterized the New. What divided them was the issue of the role of experience in establishing the unity of the church. To pose the question in its most extreme form: Is the church unified by a common experience or a common doctrine of the grace of God in Jesus Christ? The New School's answer initially was, Both. It argued for what might be called an experienced tradition and a traditioned experience, insisting that the truth of the gospel must be appropriated by faith, personally as well as intellectually. Only extremists among the Old School disagreed with that.

What troubled Old School members about this new emphasis were (1) the emotional excesses of revivalism that inevitably stereotyped experiential faith, and (2) the perceived danger in assigning subjectivity a foundational role in establishing either the assurance or the truth of faith. Of these two concerns, the second was the most crucial. Old School advocates viewed the emphasis on subjectivity as the theological equivalent of opening Pandora's box. So long as the issues of assurance and truth rested primarily on the objective testimony of Scripture as confessionally interpreted, there would be no irreparable damage to the foundations of the faith. Were the conversionists ever to lose their grip on the objectivity provided by the Bible and the Westminster Standards, however, the results would be disastrous—from the perspective of the Reformed theological tradition at that time. Subsequent history would confirm the worst fears of the Old School.

Meanwhile this new conversionist emphasis made positive contributions to our church family's tradition. Faith was awakened in new believers and reawakened in church members,

causing congregations to grow and be renewed. Surprisingly, perhaps, given some more recent stereotypes, the conversionists who believed in human transformation became leaders in the struggle for social change as well. New School Presbyterians were leading advocates of such issues as prison reform, child labor laws, and the temperance movement. Their commitment to human transformation in the power of God's grace, both personal and societal, remains the promise of the conversionist current in our tradition.

The downside manifested itself in the revolution that occurred in American intellectual culture during the nineteenth century. At the outset, confessional orthodoxy was undergirded by the dominant philosophical views of Scottish Common Sense Realism, which dominated colonial America and exerted its hegemony well into the early years of the Republic. When the philosophical winds began to change and Common Sense Realism gave way to German idealism and romanticism, the Old School prophecies of gloom and doom were fulfilled. The Christian experience advocated by the New School on the basis of its biblical and confessional commitments did in fact open the door to grounding faith in religious or moral experience generally, even as it became more and more difficult to defend the church's theological tradition. The whole story is that neither the confessionalist nor the conversionist parties could withstand the intellectual challenge of the day, resulting in the Old School circling the wagons for a last-ditch stand and their New School counterparts drifting eventually into either biblical fundamentalism or theological liberalism. It is surely one of the great ironies of our church's history that the conversionist tendency of the New School became the midwife of *culturalist* Presbyterianism—the third of the theological currents identified by Marsden as characteristic of our family traditions.

A Culturalist Current

From the beginning of its mission to the nations of the world, the church has adopted its host culture. This is evidenced by what Kwami Bediako calls one of the most remarkable features of Christianity, namely, its "linguistic flexibility." In *Christianity in Africa* he notes that the church does not have a sacred language but proclaims its gospel in the vernacular of the people addressed and translates its Scriptures into their native tongue. Because language is a central phenomenon of human culture, the cultural dependency of Christianity is not in doubt. What is open to question is the extent to which the

church may adapt its faith to the moral, philosophical, and even religious standards of its adopted culture without losing its own soul by becoming merely a cultural artifact. Does cultural dependence necessarily entail cultural determination? Put otherwise, is culture the medium of the gospel or its source?

Churches in the Reformed tradition, at their best, have been particularly sensitive to this issue—refusing to live the faith in an intellectual ghetto, seeking to transform their respective societies, and yet being ever tempted to accommodate their faith and life to the prevailing cultural winds. The German church struggle under the Nazis offers a striking example of where this tension between “Christ and culture” (H. Richard Niebuhr) can lead. The Confessing Church arose in protest against the predominant “German Christians,” who accommodated Christian faith to the cultural myth of Aryan supremacy. One result was the *Barmen Declaration* (included in our Presbyterian *Book of Confessions*), written primarily by the Reformed theologian Karl Barth, which confessed Jesus Christ as the one Word of God who calls the church to deny the siren voices of human culture.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the American Presbyterian stream of tradition includes a *culturalist* current. Here the tension has manifested itself in the question of what Christians may believe without transgressing the canons of authentic knowledge established by the Enlightenment and our modern scientific culture. One example makes the point. In *Without God, Without Creed*, subtitled *The Origins of Unbelief in America*, James Turner asks how it happened that an entire society could move from the point where one could not find a card-carrying atheist at the founding of the Republic to the present point in history where agnosticism, if not atheism, reigns supreme among America’s intelligentsia. What occasioned such a seismic shift, and who is responsible for its happening?

Turner’s answer is that the cause was the second scientific revolution, initiated by Charles Darwin. Whereas the church had made its peace with the first scientific revolution, represented by the mechanistic physics of Sir Isaac Newton, it could not come to terms with an evolutionary theory dependent upon “natural selection” (chance) rather than divine providence (purpose). Yet the theologians of the church could offer the academic world no compelling alternative. Here Turner is tough on Presbyterians because he thinks the Reformed churches have traditionally mounted the intellectual defense

for the rest of the church and were unable at this point in history to respond adequately to the challenge. The long-term result, he claims, was the gradual but inexorable loss of respect for Christian theology in the academic world and its ultimate expulsion from higher education as a confessional subject. Clearly then, the stakes are high in the culturalist endeavor to engage effectively our intellectual culture.

Another consequence of this debacle occurred within the church itself. Presbyterians who cared about being in tune with their changing intellectual world felt compelled to choose between the church's confession of faith and the culture's claim to knowledge. Newton's self-contained, lawful universe made it difficult if not impossible for thoughtful believers to entertain the notion of "miracles," including the resurrection of Jesus. Darwin's developing universe governed only by chance threw cold water on Christian belief in the active providence of a loving and purposeful God. Since few thinking believers crave membership in the Flat Earth Society, the options seemed to be the loss of faith altogether or its accommodation to the new official worldview. Accommodation, although preferable to loss of faith, has consistently resulted in a reductionist version of Christian faith that makes it something less than what is presented in the Scriptures and confessions of the church.

There are signs that the prevailing cultural winds are again shifting, however, and in two directions. First, the scientific view of the universe is itself being transformed by relativity, quantum, and chaos theories, as physicist-turned-theologian John Polkinghorne explains in *Belief in God in an Age of Science*. No longer is it intellectually necessary to dismiss biblical attribution of certain events to divine agency, for example, for the universe is now viewed as an open system that no longer precludes the possibility of acts of God. Moreover, the philosophy of science has reinterpreted the nature of scientific knowledge. It has disavowed such basic notions as pure objectivity and brute fact in favor of recognizing the interpretative role played by scientists in dependence upon their theoretical assumptions. Thus Michael Polanyi argues in *Personal Knowledge* that all knowing entails the element of *belief* in the form of undemonstrable assumptions. Thus Darwin's preference of *chance* over *providence* in interpreting his data, for example, may be attributed to his controlling but assumed naturalistic belief system. Such developments in our intellectual culture, particularly the reintroduction of *belief* into the knowledge equation, create the new possibility of reclaiming theology as

a form of knowledge rather than opinion. It also offers hope of transcending the current “paradigm” impasse between confessionalist and culturalist theologians, as Nancey Murphy suggests in *Beyond Liberalism & Fundamentalism*.

It is my own conviction that God is giving us another opportunity to engage our intellectual culture. Perhaps this time we will be able to do so effectively without the loss or reduction of our faith.

The *postmodern* mood of our culture, however, presents a different set of problems. If the modern project (beginning with the Enlightenment) demanded that faith claims meet its public truth standards, postmodernism appears to be standardless. In a world where there are only *points of view*—determined by gender, racial, ethnic, social, cultural, and historical *points of viewing*—there are only *perspectives*. The late Allan Bloom called attention to this pervasive attitude among our youth in *The Closing of the American Mind*. Writing as a professor of social thought at the University of Chicago, he claimed that the young people who sat in his classes really believed only two things: (1) all truth claims are merely matters of opinion; and (2) all morality is simply a matter of personal preference. Such is the postmodern suspicion.

Some argue that our Western culture has moved historically from the Age of Faith to the Age of Reason, to the Age of Science, and now to the Age of Suspicion. The late Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin predicted that the next development will be the Age of Carnival. That is an arresting metaphor, inviting comparison with the circus. By any standard, a circus is a very busy and often confusing event because of its abundance of activity. But a circus is a very rational event planned around three rings, one of which functions as the center of attention. A carnival, however, is a truly postmodern phenomenon. There is a game booth here, a sideshow there, and a ride over yonder, each with a barker who is trying to entice us to play the game, see the show, or take the ride. At a carnival nothing is privileged above anything else. And that, according to Bakhtin, is both descriptive of our emerging Western culture and prescriptive for it.

To the extent that the carnival metaphor is apt, it poses real problems for the culturalist current in our Presbyterian tradition. For the question becomes, Which culture shall we engage? Which, if any, among the many requires our obeisance? Which of the competing voices will we allow to allure us?

These are serious questions. Roman Catholic theologian David Tracy, for example, has devoted his academic career to

articulating the faith in accordance with what he calls “public standards of truth.” But which “public” does he have in mind? I imagine that he has in view that academic public which still dominates higher education and remains dominated by the Enlightenment vision and the scientific worldview. But at the Carnival, even that prestigious group is increasingly without special privilege.

With this insight, it seems to me, the culturalist imperative drives us back to where we began—to the question of our confession of the faith. For I am convinced that the Presbyterian Church, or any other, will survive and even thrive in the next century if it can learn afresh to confess the faith in its own terms and on the basis of its own resources. We cannot ignore our host cultures; they must be engaged for the sake of our mission to them. But neither dare we look to our cultures for approval or validation of our faith. For in a postmodern world the result will be, not merely the intellectual schizophrenia we developed in dealing with the modern project, but multiple personalities.

A PROMISING FUTURE

Where then is the promise of our theological tradition? I hear it in the sound of all three currents that carry our church along in the one stream. None is preferable to the others because each needs all for the sake of the whole. The Presbyterian Church is at its best when it confesses the faith seriously, experiences the gifts of God personally, and engages its culture critically and boldly. The three currents of our theological tradition are like the troika, that three-horse carriage employed by the Russians. The trick in driving a troika was keeping the three horses running evenly. Anything less resulted in disaster.

The same is true, I believe, of our church with its theological tradition of three strong currents. Our peril is that one or another of the currents will dominate to the exclusion or the reduction of the others. The trick we must learn is keeping the three moving evenly and together.

Who among us would not be cheered by the emergence of a broadly shared confession of faith in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)? I readily concede that we will need to swim upstream in order to achieve such a goal, especially if the carnival is in the church as much as the church is at the carnival. Many minds will need to change on all sides of the present battle lines, not in capitulation to those of different persuasions but in recognition of new possibilities of theological

reflection that are just now appearing. For myself, I am constrained by Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians:

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. (1 Corinthians 1:10, NRSV)

Given the present mood of our denomination, it would be easy to dismiss the apostle's appeal by responding, "Surely you jest." But if the divine will is heard in that exhortation, then there must be a God-given way to achieve it. I believe there is.

Likewise, who among us would not welcome the renewal of experiential faith among the members of our congregations? My impression from twenty-nine years of pastoral experience is that the "inwardness" tradition is generally underdeveloped among Presbyterians. Many members of the churches I served told me that they knew the words but not the tune of faith. Comedian Woody Allen spoke for these folks when he said he could believe if only God would cough. In other words: if only God would touch my life in an experiential way.

In *Reinventing American Protestantism*, sociologist Donald Miller presents the results of his extensive study of so-called "new paradigm" churches in California that are bursting at the seams with the boomers, busters, and Generation Xers. The conclusion of this self-styled liberal Episcopalian is that these churches thrive because they are able to put people in personal touch with God. Sometimes that takes the form of charismatic experiences, but more often it is simply the awareness that the love of God has been shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us (Romans 5:5). If that represents the conversionist current of our tradition, then I claim that promise for our denomination.

Finally, I wish also to claim the promise of our culturalist concern. My first call was to a congregation replete with aerospace engineers. I learned the hard way that it was necessary to engage them in terms of their scientific intellectual culture if I expected them to hear and believe the gospel I proclaimed. That was not easy for a young pastor educated in the liberal arts and professionally trained in biblical studies and theology. But it was necessary for ministry to a congregation dominated by the modern project. While I did not even know the term at the time, my second call took me to a congregation caught up in the postmodern mood. There the issue of science and faith was subsidiary to the larger question of how one

could believe with integrity in a world where there was no longer “Truth with a big T and in the singular,” as William James once put it. That intellectual culture also required, and requires, engagement.

In endorsing that engagement, I offer only one personal proviso. I steadfastly believe that our culture assuredly knows nothing that either confirms my faith in Jesus Christ or makes it impossible. In other words, we must engage our intellectual culture without bowing our knee to it. And we may take heart in the promise that God will make our voice heard in the cacophony of the Carnival, even as the Spirit made Paul’s voice heard in ancient Corinth.

Ours is a great family tradition passed down by people now dead who confessed the faith, experienced the faith, and engaged the faith with their intellectual culture. Now if we who are alive in faith to the promise of that tradition can just learn to keep the currents flowing evenly and together, our theological tradition has a promising future.

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