# TURNING POINTS IN AMERICAN PRESBYTERIAN HISTORY PART 13: PRESBYTERIAN REUNION IN 1983

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For over three million American Presbyterians, the Civil War ended on June 10, 1983, when the Northern Presbyterian Church (UPCUSA) merged with the Southern Presbyterian Church (PCUS) to form the Presbyterian Church (USA). The union was celebrated in Georgia, the state where the division occurred 122 years before.

Union was a long time in coming. Sporadic Northern-initiated efforts started as early as 1870, but earnest discussions began after World War II, with the establishment of comity agreements on home and foreign soil, union churches, and eventually union presbyteries. More significantly, Southern Presbyterians gradually caught up to the progressive agenda of the North, approving the ordination of women to the ministry in 1964 and adopting a book of multiple confessions in 1975. In taking the latter step, they followed the North in redefining a confession as a "witness to God's saving activity," rather than the affirmation of specific doctrines.

Two controversial judicial cases set the stage for union. In 1975, the Permanent Judicial Commission of the UPCUSA General Assembly outraged conservatives by overturning the Pittsburgh Presbytery's ordination of Wynn Kenyon. Kenyon had informed his Presbytery that he could not participate in services of ordination for women. The PJC ruled that the church must deny the ordination of someone who refused to follow "an explicit constitutional provision." That decision prompted the departure of forty conservative congregations, including Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia.

The second case involved the reception of Mansfield Kaseman, a minister in the United Church of Christ, by the National Capitol Union Presbytery in 1981. Although Kasemen denied the deity of Christ, the PJC decided that his beliefs fell within the "acceptable range of interpretation" of the denomination's confessions. The ruling persuaded a dozen renewal-minded congregations (in the North and South) that it was time to leave mainline Presbyterianism. Because these churches were open to women's ordination and the exercise of charismatic gifts, there was no denomination for them to join, and so they formed the Evangelical Presbyterian Church.

These divisive cases actually promoted union by consigning the most vocal conservative voices to separatist denominations. Yet when the mainline merger finally took place in 1983, it was ironically beaten by a year when the eight-year-old Presbyterian Church in America absorbed the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod. This could also claim to be a North-South reunion and even an Old School-New School reunion, as system subscriptionists in the RPCES joined the mainly strict subscriptionists in the PCA. (The Orthodox Presbyterian Church was a participant in this "joining and receiving" process, but an insufficient number of PCA presbyteries approved the receiving of the OPC. Four years later, the PCA did extend a "J and R" invitation to the OPC, but the OPC declined the invitation.)

As in the American Presbyterian reunions of the past, great fanfare accompanied the mainline merger, including a communion service with 13,000 in attendance. But whereas the Old School-New School reunion of 1869 prompted ambitious planning for a new era of Presbyterian service to the nation, the 1983 reunion was accompanied by concern for denominational decline. Since 1983, there have been three areas of hemorrhaging in the PC(USA).

Most obvious has been the steep decline in membership. In 1965, the combined membership of the predecessor denominations was over four million. By the turn of the millennium, membership was barely over two million. Remaining conservatives placed the blame on a liberal church bureaucracy that was out of touch with the laity. For evidence, they cited the denomination's advocacy of liberal political causes, from abortion on demand to a nuclear freeze. For their part, Presbyterian liberals desperately attempted to explain away the decline, citing such factors as declining birthrates and the social mobility of the (highly educated) Presbyterian laity.

Yet mobility had greater consequences than they imagined, and membership decline pointed to the church's loss of theological identity. The PC(USA) was the victim of its own ecumenical efforts, which diminished the significance of Presbyterian identity. The church could not at the same time drink from the well of the ecumenical movement and perform a coherent job of boundary maintenance. Children growing up in the church had no compelling reason to remain Presbyterian when reaching adulthood.

The Presbyterians were reaping the consequences of a broadening church that subjected its Reformed heritage to constant modification. Confessions were not absolute and timeless statements of doctrine, but situational expressions of experience. This was not only the settlement of the Presbyterian controversy of the 1930s; beyond that, it was the revivalist heritage that made the experiential elements of the Christian life more important than confessional affirmations. As an ever-broadening church, it could forge no response to its children who exited for individualist, consumerist, or therapeutic forms of spirituality.

A yet more serious issue was the denomination's loss of any capacity for corporate theological reflection. A moratorium on theological debate was another legacy of the Presbyterian controversy of the 1920s and 1930s. After the fracture of the fragile Barthian consensus in the 1960s, mainline Presbyterianism was reduced to a loose coalition of subcultures. If heresy trials became a distant memory in American Presbyterianism, it was only because groups in the church relocated their energy in advocacy groups and special interest caucuses.

To be sure, defenders of what some euphemistically described as "theological decentralization" argued with some justification that diversity was a perennial feature of American Presbyterianism. What was novel, however, was the extent to which Presbyterians embraced pluralism as part of their identity. No longer were theological differences something to overcome in order to progress in the unity of the faith.

Because debate could no longer resolve controversy, polity decisions, often ruthlessly enforced, were the only means to achieve theological uniformity. Church bureaucrats could force compliance on issues such as women's ordination (Kenyon), even within a church that could not commonly affirm the deity of Christ.

Many observers are now predicting that the 1983 Presbyterian reunion will be short-lived, and that the fourth century of Presbyterianism in America, just like the previous three, will witness another major split. This is plausible when one considers the deeply divisive issues pertaining to human sexuality. Before the reunion, the 1978 General Assembly of the UPCUSA overwhelmingly passed the "definitive guidance" that "unrepentant homosexual practice does not accord with the requirements of ordination as set forth in the *Book of Church Order*." Many Southern conservatives were heartened at the vote and interpreted it as a sign of renewal in the North. Yet the decision also galvanized pro-gay interest groups.

Evangelical interest groups have managed to preserve the 1978 ruling against challenges at subsequent general assemblies. In 2001, the presbyteries of the church defeated "Amendment A," which would have permitted the ordination of practicing homosexuals, and a recommendation at the 2004 Assembly to set aside the 1978 guidance went down to defeat by the narrow margin of 259 to 255. More challenges are certain to come.

The leadership of Presbyterian conservatives is spearheaded by the Presbyterian Lay Committee and its affiliated group, the Confessing Church Movement. To identify with the latter, a Presbyterian congregation must affirm a minimalist three-point "confession" of the lordship of Christ, the infallibility of Scripture, and the sanctity of monogamous, heterosexual marriage. That the sanctity of marriage has proven to be more precious to conservatives than the deity of Christ (which was no cause to leave the church) may be the biggest indication of the theological bankruptcy of the church.

Meanwhile, the Presbyterian liberals have recently expressed their intention to achieve the full recognition of homosexual rights in the church. There has been recent talk of drafting a new Auburn Affirmation of the church's liberty and progress on this issue.

In the end, a division in the Presbyterian mainline denomination will likely await the resolution of issues regarding ministerial pensions and church property to the satisfaction of all parties. While those were the "goods and kindred" that Machen and his separatist allies were willing to let go in 1936, both conservatives and liberals in the mainline denomination have proven more eager to maintain the prestige of establishment Presbyterianism. This is but another reminder that the real loser in the reunion of 1983 was Presbyterian confessionalism. Current Presbyterian debates about liberty and unity in the church fail to acknowledge the way in which genuine confessionalism ultimately protects both.

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