

Do Presbyterians Really Learn Anything From Their History?

Considering why the lessons of history are not passively learned.

by Frederick J. Heuser, Jr.

MORE THAN EIGHT DECADES AGO, HENRY Van Dyke, a distinguished Presbyterian and Professor of English Literature at Princeton University, in an address before the annual meeting of the Presbyterian Historical Society, referred to Presbyterians as "God's silly people." While the adjective "silly" might seem inappropriate for the people more frequently referred to as "God's frozen chosen," Van Dyke was very clear about why this designation was appropriate.

First, he argued, Presbyterians have a "propensity to quarrel amongst themselves and divide their forces on minor issues." Anyone with even a rudimentary knowledge of our history will attest to this characteristic. Presbyterians, as we know, can be a rather contentious lot. George III and many of his contemporaries at the time of the American Revolution commented about that. Anyone who had experienced a General Assembly, presbytery, or session meeting will have experienced this quality as well. And secondly, Van Dyke opined, Presbyterians have an "almost incredible indifference to the real significance of their own history." "One reason why our churches have suffered a comparative loss in power and influence," Van Dyke reasoned, "is because our Presbyterian people have failed [to]...preserve and cherish the heritage of the past, and draw courage and inspiration for the

present from [the past]."¹ In effect, Presbyterians it would seem do not learn very much from the lessons of their past, an observation that many would share as we enter a new millennium.

Recently, I participated in a retreat discussion about the future of the Presbyterian Church. "What will the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) look like in the year 2025?" the presenter asked. The church of the future, I was told, would look very different. It would have fewer members and more limited resources. It would be a church that is connected to the Internet, more diverse in its membership with perhaps more than 20% racial ethnic congregations, and more "efficient" in how it deployed its human, financial, and mission resources. The church of the future would be dominated by an aging boomer generation, nearly devoid of Generation X-ers, and heavily populated by those born in the 1980s, 1990s and shortly after the turn of the century. In order for the church of the twenty-first century to survive, parts of it that we are now familiar with would have to die.

None of these characteristics surprised me, for many of these trends are apparent today. I asked the presenter, "Is there a place for our heritage in this future church? Will our history matter a half century from now?"

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His answer was disturbing. No, he pronounced, history will *not* matter. Some will be interested, but our perspective will be shaped by the present and our anticipation of the future. That which has gone before will have no place in the rapidly changing world of the twenty-first century.

I reacted to this prediction on two levels. The optimist in me proclaimed that he was simply wrong. The cynic in me feared he might be right. If he is right, I reasoned, every decision we make right now is futile, with no short or long term significance. If he is right, then regardless of our actions at this and future meetings, the future will render what we do as well-intentioned at best and irrelevant at worst. If his prediction is correct, then our collective memory as a church will be forgotten by all save a few.

If his assumption is indeed true, it will mean that the PC(USA) will be divorced not only from its history, but from its theological foundations as well. Because our theology has both shaped and informed our history, a rejection of one will presuppose a rejection of the other. Anyone who has taught or participated in a Bible study clearly understands this. One cannot comprehend scripture without understanding its historical context. One cannot study the theology of Calvin and the other great Reformers without understanding the context which gave rise to the Reformation.

Historically, Presbyterians and other Christians have valued our heritage as God's will unfolding for humankind. The most important question isn't whether our history will be relevant in the future. The central issue is whether Presbyterians use the lessons of their past. Do we really learn from our past experiences? Some Presbyterians, no doubt, venerate our past as a shrine at which to worship. Filiopietism, a glorified form of ancestor worship, is a universally recognized application of this concept. A walk through this institution's portrait gallery reflects how previous generations of Presbyterians felt about their ancestors, at least those that were dead, white, and male. Other Presbyterians perhaps use the past to

assure themselves that things really were better than they are now, a smug way of admitting that past generations of futurists really did get it all wrong! Others, no doubt, regard their history as a means to understanding themselves and where they fit in the grand evolutionary scheme of things.

Presbyterians have always been a reflective people. We are a biblical people for whom both our theology and heritage matter. As Presbyterians, it is important to understand that scriptural authority sanctions both introspection and reflection, important tools in the historical process. What then is our scriptural understanding of the role of history? Let's examine a couple of scriptural passages.

First Chronicles 16:8, 12 reminds us to "give thanks to the Lord...*make known* his deeds among peoples!...*Remember* the wonderful works he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he uttered." The Seventy-eighth Psalm proclaims that "we will not hide them from their children: we will *tell* to the coming generations the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done." At the time of the creation of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the General Assembly affirmed these scriptural passages by encouraging Presbyterians to "welcome the new things that the Lord is doing in the world and to respect the old things that are of value. Let us be proud of our heritage because it glorifies God and not ourselves."

In looking at these scriptural passages, there are several active verbs that are important. First, we must *remember* what has gone before us. And second, we must *tell* future generations what has come before so they too can remember. But there is more than *just* remembering and telling. Equally as important is *understanding* what has come before and how that impacts both the present and the future.

Understanding our past requires thought, for in order to comprehend those "lessons of history" that we always hear about we must develop a historical perspective. Shocking as this may sound, I do not believe that

history automatically teaches us anything. The lessons of history are not quite as tangible as the Ten Commandments or the Sermon on the Mount, even though we might like them to be. The most important lessons that we learn from our past are the ones we consciously chose to learn, shaped by a willingness to develop and use a historical perspective to understand the present. The lessons of history are not learned passively. Aldous Huxley once noted, "That men do not learn very much from the lessons of history is the most important of all the lessons that history has to teach." He might very well have been right. If he is right, Presbyterians in the church of 2025 may not have any practical use for their heritage.

I. Remembering What Is Past

How is it then that we remember our past? And what determines what we selectively chose to remember or forget? Whether we are talking about our church's history or our own personal history, there are two interrelated components that shape our memory: the commonness of our history and the complexity of our history.

The commonness of our history is easy to understand. We remember our past when it is convenient for us to invoke or seek temporary inspiration from a historical event. Sentimentality and nostalgia inspire us to remember what has gone before. For example, the year 1998 marked a number of milestones: the centennial of the Spanish-American War, the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the state of Israel, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the establishment of the Presbyterian Church in America, the fifteenth anniversary of the creation of the PC(USA), the ten-year anniversary of the move to Louisville by the General Assembly.

And what of those personal milestones in our own lives? How many of us will remember significant events this year: the birth of a child or grandchild; a college or seminary graduation, a wedding anniversary, etc.? These milestones are important to us because they represent demarcations in our own past.

This past summer I saw a movie that had a tremendous impact upon me. Some of you may have seen Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*. Amidst the horror of war that Spielberg graphically reproduces, the movie is really about one aging World War II veteran's effort to come to terms with events that happened more than half a century ago. It is really a story about the present. The story that Spielberg masterfully unfolds is a psychological revisiting of a time and world that are no more and one individual's journey to make sense of the horrors experienced in his youth. While the story is framed in the past, its ties to the present in the mind of an aging veteran are very real. In the movie's final scene, the aging veteran poignantly asks, "Have I lived a good life? Have I lived a life that matters?" This is the kind of typology of historic perspective I am talking about.

These important milestones in the life of a nation, a church, or an individual are the commonness of our history. They are shared events that surface quickly in our stream of consciousness. Too frequently, these symbols serve only to remind us we indeed had a past. But they convey nothing about the complexity, vitality, and meaning of that past. For a brief moment, they cause us to pause to remember some distant event. In and of themselves, they teach us nothing; their purpose is to provide a focus point for more serious reflection.

But what of the complexity of our history? I am reminded of a dialogue between two literary critics over the value of history. "Why are you critical of my belief in the value of history?" inquired the first critic. "It is because of your *dependence* upon it," quipped the second. The assumption that we *need* history flies in the face of self-centered individualism. To assume that contemporary challenges and problems are unique to our times is really to divorce our generation from its connection to others who have gone before. To assume that *our* times are uniquely different than anything that has come before represents an immaturity and self-centeredness at best and a cultural arrogance at worst.

II. Using Our Past

Let's briefly examine several contemporary issues in light of our own past. For more than three decades, Presbyterians have debated participation in the Consultation on Church Union (COCU). The arguments are all too familiar. Some believe that participation in this ecumenical endeavor will be at the expense of our denominational distinctiveness. Others believe COCU reflects a spirit of unity within the body of Christ.

Despite the fact that Presbyterians have debated COCU for more than three decades, this was not the first, nor will it be the last time Presbyterians will deal with these issues. For instance, as early as 1801 Presbyterians found themselves in disagreement over whether to participate in the Plan of Union with the Congregational Church. Conservative Presbyterians then, not unlike the arguments used during the recent COCU discussion, feared that the Plan of Union compromised the distinctiveness of Presbyterian doctrine and polity. Others felt that this plan simply made sense in a time of limited resources and expanding frontiers. Did we join? Yes. Was everyone in agreement? No. Did we lose our denominational distinctiveness? Of course not. But the fear that we would was very real.

Another example. In 1810, an organization known as the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions was established as a bold ecumenical venture between Presbyterians and Congregationalists. A lot of Presbyterians were not happy with this effort, fearing again that our distinctiveness would be compromised by association with fellow Christians whose ordination standards were not quite as rigid as ours. Many Presbyterians requested that the General Assembly set up a parallel denominational organization to preserve our denominational distinctiveness. The GA declined to do so for many years, preferring in the spirit of the Plan of Union to cooperate with the ABCFM. This spirit of cooperation continued until this and other issues caused Old and New School Presbyterians to divide in a schism that was to

last more than thirty years, and in 1838 more conservative Old School Presbyterians established the Board of Foreign Missions.

Now why should these examples be relevant to us in light of the COCU discussions? Was the disagreement really over ecumenism vs. denominational distinctiveness? I do not think so. In both examples, it was about what it means to be the Church of Christ. It really wasn't about mission agencies or bishops. It meant coming to terms with the history that has divided us. Most of us, I suspect, are unwilling to admit that, when it is easier to argue about bishops or mission agencies. In fact, even more tragically, as we debated COCU during the last several assemblies, was there any point of reference to our shared cooperative past with other Christians? Or were we merely willing to send COCU to its long-standing demise by invoking arguments that may have been symbolic, but not substantive?

Let's examine a second example that reflects how we have dealt with diversity within our church. Theologically, we have always been a diverse people. Even a cursory glance of what caused Presbyterians to divide in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries suggests that eighteenth- or nineteenth-century Presbyterians, were they alive today, might not feel completely out of place. So let's put that issue aside for now. Let's talk about diversity in terms of gender and race.

Women began their participation in the American Presbyterian church as lay volunteers and continued in that fashion through the twentieth century. Nineteenth-century women participated in the life of the church by volunteering their services, initially by promoting various mission-oriented and educational interests. In fact, women are not mentioned in official documents of the Presbyterian Church for two decades after the formation of the General Assembly in 1789 except for informal accounts attesting to their activities. Their first public recognition came in 1811, when the General Assembly recognized the work of "pious females" in voluntary, benevolent, and reform organizations. Later, they were described as "orna-

mental and useful in the House of God." I am reminded that an early nineteenth-century pastor cautioned that women should not be allowed to pray in the absence of men, fearing that "no one knows what the women would pray for if left alone." Indeed, for much of the next century and a half, despite enormous efforts of time, energy, and financial resources, women were ignored, and perhaps worse, patronized for their piety, but not recognized for their gifts and talents. It was only in the twentieth century that women became elders and later ministers of the Word and Sacrament.

Why has it taken American Presbyterian women nearly two centuries to gain the status rightfully deserving of their service to our church? I would argue that as a church we were afraid to confront the culture. We were also afraid of confronting ourselves and what it meant to be the body of Christ. We were afraid to ask those hard questions about the complexity of our past, in this case regarding issues of justice, fairness, and more importantly, God's love. With respect to women, we are still struggling with those same issues today.

These issues of justice and fairness are equally as evident when we think about racism. While I am not a sociologist, I suspect that at the very heart of racism is fear—fear based upon our very insecurity as people. A fear that produces an inability to recognize human differences as a gift from God. This same fear manifested itself throughout our history. We feared to confront the inhumanity of slavery; we feared to desegregate our schools and our churches, confidently reassuring ourselves that Jim Crow's law was God's law. We were afraid to confront the culture, but we were also afraid of confronting ourselves and what it meant to be the body of Christ. We struggle with racism today four decades after the civil rights movement because of our fear of the consequences of racial justice. As long as we continue to define humanity by its differences, we will continue to play upon that innate, inherent fear. If we have learned anything from the complexity of past race and

gender relations, it should be that fear must be faced in the context of the Gospel. Hope must replace fear if we are to live out the mandates set forth in the Christian Gospel.

Finally, how does the complexity of our past inform us at this current junction in our history? Are we to face another schism as we did during the 1930s? How does our recent past shed light on our current situation? Let me refer briefly here to two relatively recent historical studies that should be required reading for all church leaders. Bradley Longfield in his book *The Presbyterian Controversy* examines the Fundamentalist and Modernist controversy of the 1920s and 1930s. He tells us that the "current identity crisis of the Presbyterian Church has its roots in the conflicts of the 1920s when the church opted for institutional above strict doctrinal unity." During that time, the Fundamentalists, most prominent of whom was J. Gresham Machen, argued that if the church was to survive in the midst of a secular culture it had to be grounded in precise doctrine. The Modernists, as exemplified by Charles Erdman, Robert Speer, et al., placed less stress on doctrine and more on the united work of the church. In the end, Longfield concludes, the church embraced pluralism in the 1920s and 1930s at the expense of doctrinal unity. The need for unity superseded the need for doctrinal purity. In short, our predecessors in the 1920s and 1930s embraced theological diversity. "Clearly," he tells us, "if the mainstream churches are to resolve their identity crisis, they will have to do so on the basis of a biblical and credal faith that is distinct from the values and norms of the surrounding culture." Longfield's call for a middle theological position has resonated well in some parts of our denomination.²

The second study, authored by William "Beau" Weston, is titled *Presbyterian Pluralism*. Weston is a sociologist. What makes his study valuable is that he looks at larger groups within the church and how they interacted with each other over time. He identifies these groups as liberals (the left wing), conservatives (the right wing), and

loyalists (a large group in the middle). Weston argues that both the left and right wings of the church are (and continue to be) in competition for the large loyalist center whose major concern is to preserve the institution as it is. Loyalists, he tells us, first seek the peace, then the unity, and only then the purity of the church. This is precisely what happened, he argues, in the Charles Briggs case of the 1890s and the Fundamentalist-Modernist conflict of the 1920s and 1930s. When either extreme tried to move the loyalist center too far in either direction, as Briggs and Machen attempted to do, the church rejected these efforts, believing that the peace of the church should not be jeopardized for the sake of doctrinal unity. A similar dynamic happened at the 1997 General Assembly, according to Weston. The desire for peace makes compromise crucial for the loyalists.³

Both Longfield's and Weston's studies suggest the importance of understanding the complexity of our history as it relates to our times. Both offer an analysis of our unity and diversity conflict in light of our recent past. Both attempt to understand the complexity of personalities, ideas, and forces that have shaped our present. Both use a historic perspective not to predict our future, but to inform our present.

Conclusion

So I return to the question: Do we Presbyterians really learn anything from our past and will it make any difference as we embrace our future? Presbyterians can learn a great deal from their past if they are intentional about *developing* and *using* a historical perspective to understand contemporary problems. What we learn from our past has more to do with the *kinds of questions we ask rather than the answers we expect*. To assume that Presbyterians will have no use for their history suggests that we have either acquired the gift of prophecy *or* have mightily deceived ourselves with self-centered folly that will prove to be a poor substitute for experience and understanding. How "God's Silly People" will confront that future remains uncertain.

NOTES

¹Henry Van Dyke, "Our Heritage of History and Our Duty as Trustees of the Past. A Presidential Address Delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Presbyterian Historical Society, January 9, 1913." *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society* 7 (1913): 1–11.

²Bradley J. Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy: Fundamentalists, Modernists, and Moderates* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3–8, 231–35.

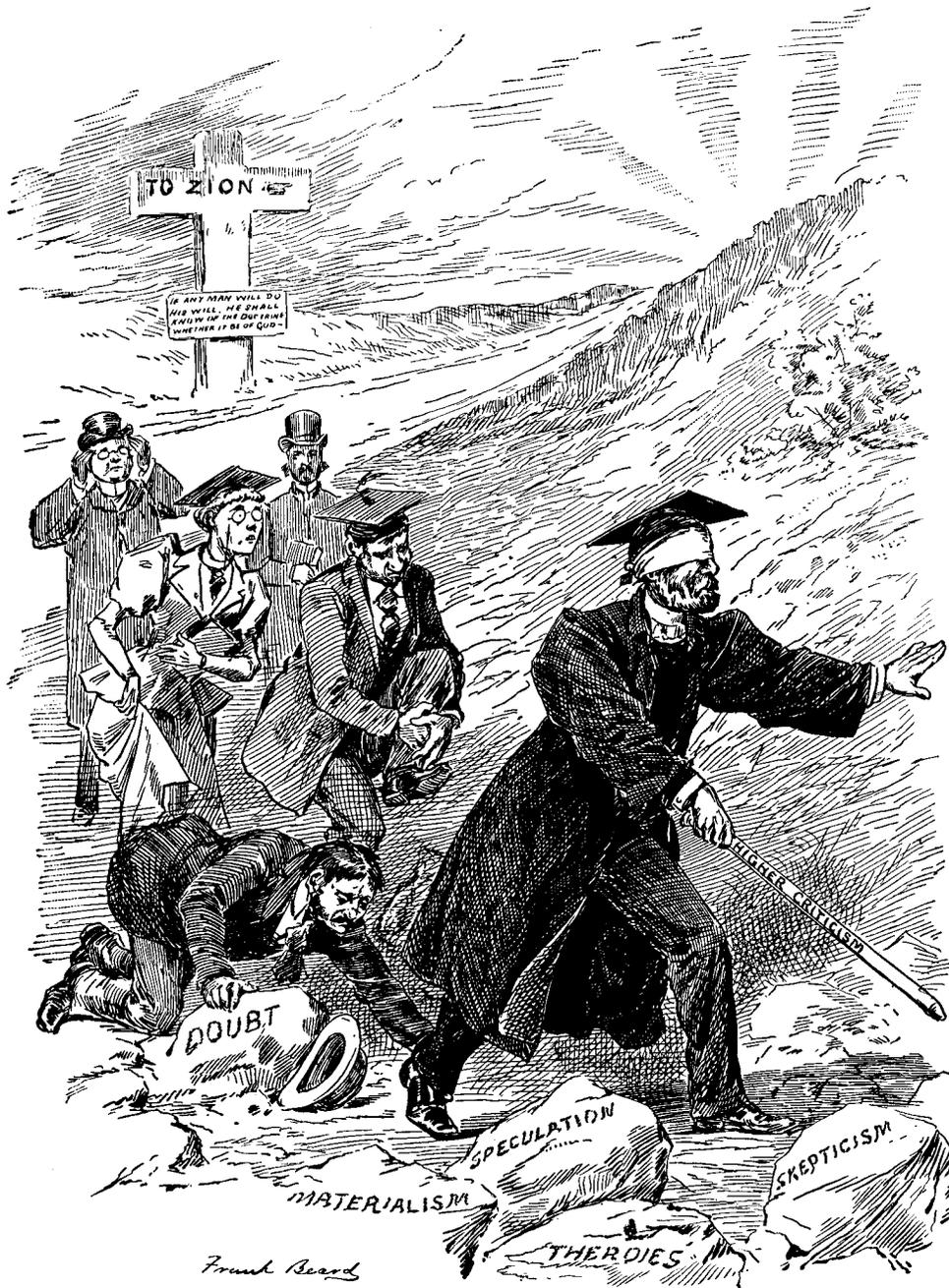
³William J. Weston, *Presbyterian Pluralism: Competition In A Protestant House* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), xi–xiv, chapters 13–14.



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WHAT IS LEFT?

Artifacts of a Controversy: *The Ram's Horn*, a weekly paper published by Frederick L. Chapman in Chicago, 1890–c.1910, was one of the first religious journals to use the promotional techniques of the popular press—satirical humor, light verse, and above all the cartoon caricature—to advance a religious cause, namely conservative Protestant Evangelicalism. Founded as an independent weekly, and advertising itself as “nonpartisan” and “nonsectarian,” the *Ram's Horn* had a distinct Populist cast in its early years. It satirized the money interests, the liquor interests, and the vanities of a wealthy elite, while it defended the virtues of plain church-going women and the honest dignity of sober working men. As the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy took shape, it was simple for the *Ram's Horn* to apply the tools of political satire to religious satire. Caricature, never subtle as a technique, clarified the issues but eliminated any middle ground in the conflict. Long before the controversy divided Presbyterian church courts in the 1920s, cartoons such as the sample above and on the following page polarized options, fixed stereotypes, and graphically depicted extremes. This cartoon, from 1896, shows a well-dressed professor irreverently shoveling through Holy Writ like an archeologist. Through the sieve of “the Higher Criticism,” he sifts out all miracles, all prophecies, all divine promises, all inspiration, until he is left with only the refuse of his own opinions.



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OFF THE TRACK.—“A Blind Leader of the Blind.”

This 1896 *Ram's Horn* cartoon, signed by Frank Beard, depicts the learned professor using the “Higher Criticism” as a blind person’s stick as he leads the gullible public—including the novelty of the age, a college-educated woman—off the path to Zion and among the rocks of doubt, materialism, speculation, theories, and skepticism. The quotation on the cross reads: “If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine whether it be of God” (John 7:17 KJV).