The Fractured Body of Christ: Recollections, Reflections and Observations on the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) Schism by an Alabama Pastor

by Vernon S. Broyles III

Vernon Broyles reflects on his twenty-plus years as a pastor of Presbyterian Church in the United States congregations in North Carolina and Alabama in the midst of the Civil Rights struggle and the schismatic campaign within the PCUS that brought into being the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). The latter conflict, fought over issues of orthodoxy, purity, biblical interpretation and church property, provides some lessons in retrospect for dealing with many of the internal conflicts that trouble our own Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) today. Having revisited some of his own history as a pastor, Broyles attempts to lift out some lessons for us today regarding what it means, at the core of our polity and the vows we take, to call ourselves "Presbyterian."

Vernon S. Broyles III today (courtesy of Vernon S. Broyles III).

In February 1968, I moved to Dothan, Alabama, in response to the call of the Evergreen Presbyterian Church to be their pastor. In the course of my ministry in North Carolina the previous six years, I was well aware of the rising clamor of some in the Presbyterian Church in the United States (the "Southern Church") over the perceived drift of the denomination and its leaders toward the "far left." That anxiety was fueled, in part, by the national cultural upheavals of the Sixties—the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, and the "sexual revolution"—which, like all cultural shifts, affected Christian communities across the board. The anxiety was exacerbated by the spectre of Communism and the lingering conviction on the part of many, who were trying to protect what they perceived as "traditional America," that Joseph McCarthy was right.

To whatever degree that had impacted my ministry in rural North Carolina, I found those dynamics in spades in South Alabama. My acceptance of Evergreen's call was contingent, of course, on my examination by East Alabama Presbytery and their agreement to sustain that examination as satisfactory. I went into that called meeting of the presbytery on December 12, 1967, with some trepidation, having heard from elders on the Evergreen Session that the presbytery was controlled by very conservative individuals, and that they had actually attempted to force the church to call someone of their choosing. As it turned out, my examiners were relatively gentle—in part, I think, because of my father's good name as an orthodox churchman and the fact that my own core theology, and the ways I tend to express it when queried, are quite traditional.

At East Alabama Presbytery, I quickly discovered how completely things were controlled by men who were already working

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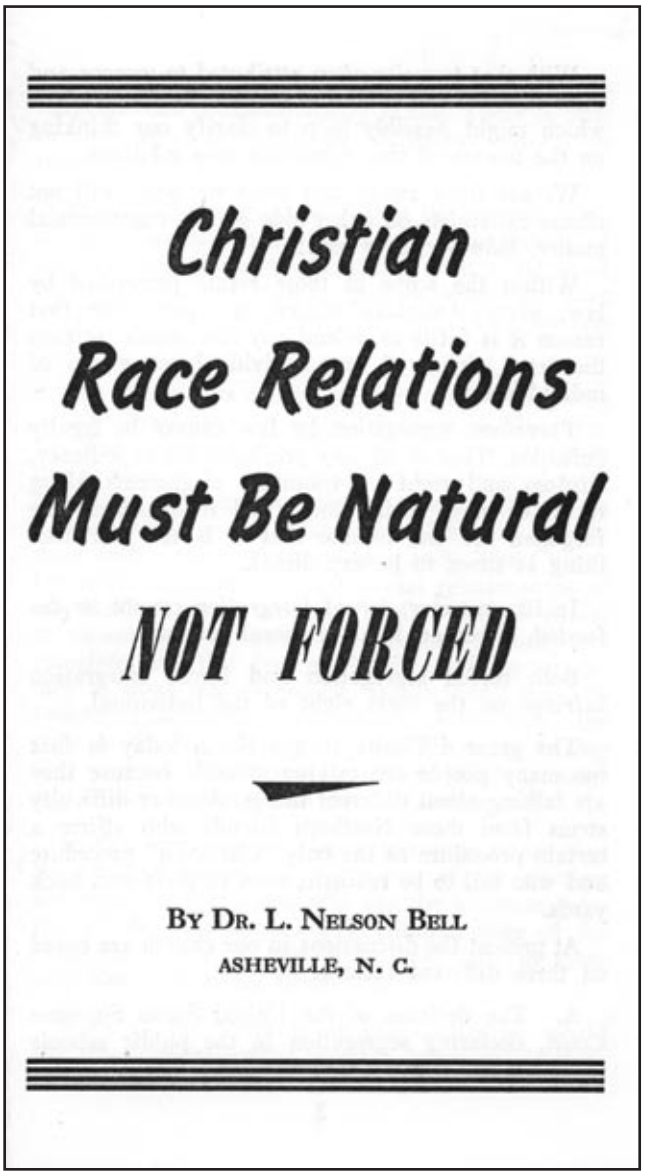
on the vision of a separate church, because they could not achieve their level of presbytery control at the denominational level. The best they could do in combating what they perceived as liberal control of the General Assembly and its committees was to use that sort of strategy at the presbytery level, albeit in the name of their own professed principles.

At that point in our history, the battle lines had been pretty well drawn. It was "good" against "evil," "conservative" against "liberal." There was little middle ground. This was exceedingly unfortunate, in view of the reality that there were many truly conservative presbyters who were absolutely loyal to the PCUS despite their strong differences with some of the actions of the General Assembly. I use the terms "conservative" and "liberal" in much of what follows to delineate the difference between those who were moving toward schism and those who were resisting division.

It is a matter of record in the minutes of East Alabama Presbytery during my time there that the Permanent Nominating Committee of the presbytery was controlled by the conservatives, and every list of commissioners to the General Assembly included primarily ministers and elders who were critical of the denomination and its leadership.

At one point, the General Assembly voted to redraw synod boundaries to create "regional synods," with our Synod of Alabama becoming part of one that included the states of Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Kentucky. Fearful that this would jeopardize conservative control of the presbytery, our East Alabama Presbytery sent a delegation—four ministers and four elders—instructed to propose and push for a plan that would leave only Alabama and Mississippi together in their own synod, an effort that failed.


Christian
Race Relations
Must Be Natural
NOT FORCED
By Dr. L. Nelson Bell
Asheville, N. C.

"Christian Race Relations Must Be Natural, Not Forced," by Dr. L. Nelson Bell, was reprinted from the August 17, 1955 *Southern Presbyterian Journal* (Weaverville, N.C.: 1955.)

The Conservative Voice

During most of the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s, the voice of traditionally conservative Presbyterians was a publication called *The Southern Presbyterian Journal*, whose guiding spirit was Dr. L. Nelson Bell, who served for many years as a medical missionary in China. When Bell returned to a medical practice in Asheville, North Carolina, he became deeply concerned about what he perceived as the failure of our church to keep faith with the fundamental principles of the Lordship of Jesus Christ, the authority of Scripture and the Great Commission. This concern issued in the creation of the *Southern Presbyterian Journal* by Bell and Dr. Henry B. Dendy, pastor of the Presbyterian church in Weaverville, North Carolina. Bell served as editor (to be succeeded by Rev. G. Aiken Taylor) and Dendy as business manager. They were supported by a board made up of prominent conservative Presbyterians from across the denomination. From my earliest days as a seminarian, I was aware of the continuous verbal battle that went on between supporters of the *Presbyterian Outlook*, edited by Aubrey Brown in Richmond, Virginia, and supporters of the *Journal.* Presbyterians who wanted to know what issues were in play in the denomina-

tion, and what the opposing arguments were, read both the *Outlook* and the *Journal.*

By the early sixties, supporters of the *Journal* were calling attention to what they saw as the nerve center of the liberal control of the denomination—an alleged "secret society" called the Fellowship of St. James. They averred that this was the group that planned the strategies for General Assembly that resulted in control of assembly committees, decided which motions were made and calculated, and where the votes would be to pass the motions. *Journal* supporters were disturbed even more when that group appeared to expand into a larger network called "The Fellowship of Concern."

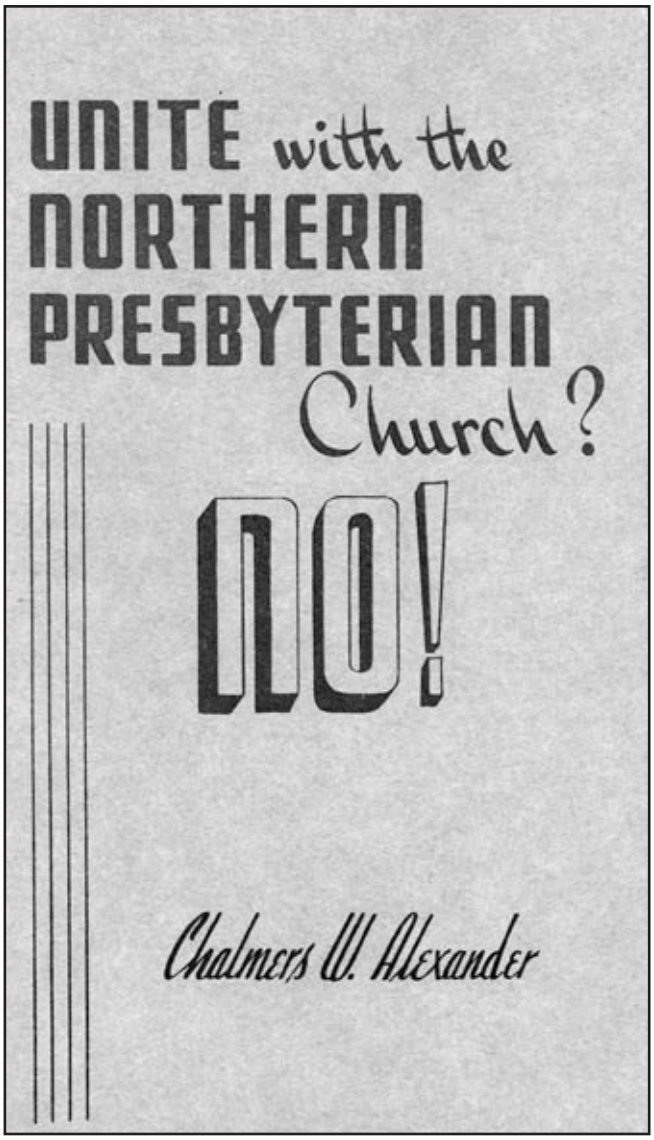
Perhaps at this point we should lift up the one issue that seems to have disturbed and terrified supporters of the *Journal* the most—possible reunion with "the Northern Church."

The United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. and its predecessor Presbyterian Church, U.S.A epitomized to many conservatives in the PCUS everything they were upset about. Among the many alleged bugaboos were lax doctrine, racially liberal policies, women in ordained leadership, amorphous confessional standards, sexual freedoms, and conversations with other church bodies that did not adhere to the Reformed faith, such as those explored by the Consultation on Church Union (COCU).

Those allegations against "the Northern Church" surfaced every time the General Assembly voted to call for a presbytery vote on reunion. Opponents of reunion cheered when a large number of presbyteries voted to block reunion in 1954-55. That joy turned to anger when a number of PCUS presbyteries, tired of waiting, joined their UPCUSA counterparts in creating "union presbyteries." Anti-unionists railed that this was "Union by the back door." It intensified their passion to resist. For more on this Union Presbytery Movement and its impact on the future of the church, see the recent book by William McAtee, *Dreams, Where Have You Gone?* It is an extensive chronicle of the history of the formation of union presbyteries and is loaded with anecdotal material from many of the leaders in making the union presbyteries a reality.

Concerned Presbyterians and the Growth of Conservative Dissent

By August 1964, when the board of the *Southern Presbyterian Journal* met, it was agreed that the situation was dire and that something more than



This pamphlet by Chalmers W. Alexander, "Unite with the Northern Presbyterian Church? No!" first appeared as an article in the July 15, 1947, issue of the *Southern Presbyterian Journal* (Weaverville, N.C.: 1947).

the *Journal*'s advocacy was needed. The board asked Kenneth S. Keyes (pronounced "kīze") a wealthy elder from Miami, to create an advocacy organization that would actively combat efforts toward reunion and the liberalization of the PCUS. According to Keyes' own history of this efforts, "they decided that…it would be a lay organization, because if conservative ministers in liberal presbyteries became involved, they could be defrocked."

Thus was born Concerned Presbyterians, led by Keyes as president, Col. Roy LeCraw of Atlanta as vice president, Elder W. J. (Jack) Williamson of Greenville, Alabama, as secretary, and J.M. Vroon of Miami as treasurer. The first bulletin was issued

and distributed (some 50,000 copies) in March, 1965, stating the reasons for the concern of Concerned Presbyterians:

> We are concerned
> *because the primary mission of the church—winning people to Jesus Christ and nurturing them in faith—is being compromised today by overemphasis on social, economic and political matters, forgetting the basic necessity for regeneration.
> *because the integrity and authority of the Word of God are being questioned by dubious theories of revelation in some of the literature of the church.
> *because some presbyteries no longer require complete loyalty to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechism.
> *because continued membership in the National Council of Churches involves us in activities, pronouncements and programs of which we strongly disapprove, and repeated protests to that body have been ignored.
> *because the plan to establish a central treasurer now approved by the General Assembly indicates a determination to regiment benevolence giving of the church's members by "equalizing" their gifts—in effect actually thwarting the wishes of many donors.
> *because another determined effort has been started to effect a union of the Presbyterian Church U.S. with the United Presbyterian Church U.S.A.—which is now engaged in negotiations to unite with denominations that do not adhere to the Reformed faith.

It should be noted that there was a special message to Presbyterians who were already leaving the denomination or planning to leave, since Keyes was well aware that if everyone who was disaffected left, the votes for change would leave with them. So there was a message in bold type:

> "This is not the answer…
> "Concerned Presbyterians, Inc. does *not* recommend that anyone withdraw from our beloved church. Our goal is to reverse the trends that are causing so many members to consider withdrawal. We should 'stand fast and hold the traditions which ye have been taught.'"

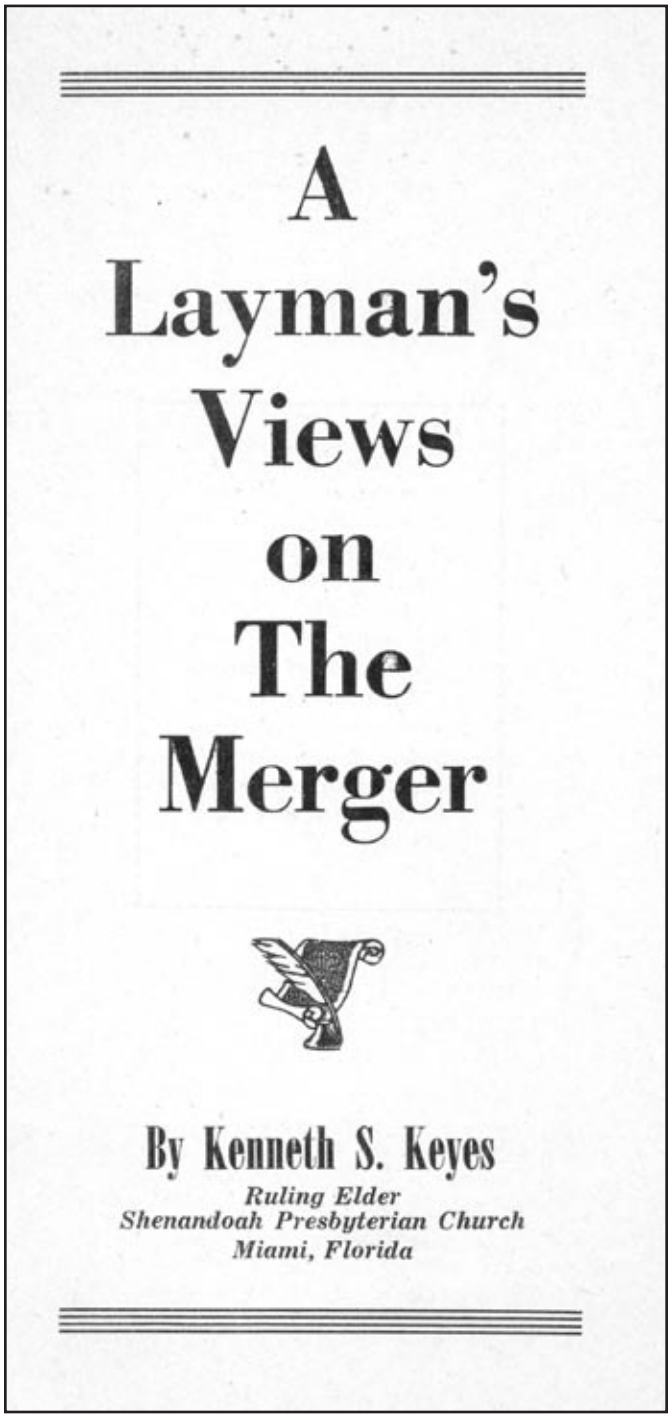
During this time, other groups were formed, prominent among them the Presbyterian Evangelical Fellowship. Founded by Rev. William P. Hill, a pastor in Hopewell, Virginia, this group was committed to reversing what was perceived as a lack of interest in evangelism. Ultimately, PEF recruited fifteen evangelists around the church and supported two staff persons. They ended up becoming a separate mission agency, committed to sending conservative missionaries overseas at a time when many conservative churches were withholding their mission dollars.

Presbyterian Churchmen United also emerged, consisting of some 500 conservative ministers, led by Dr. John E. Richards of First Presbyterian Church in Macon, Georgia (now a PCA congregation), as president and Rev. Paul Settle as field director.

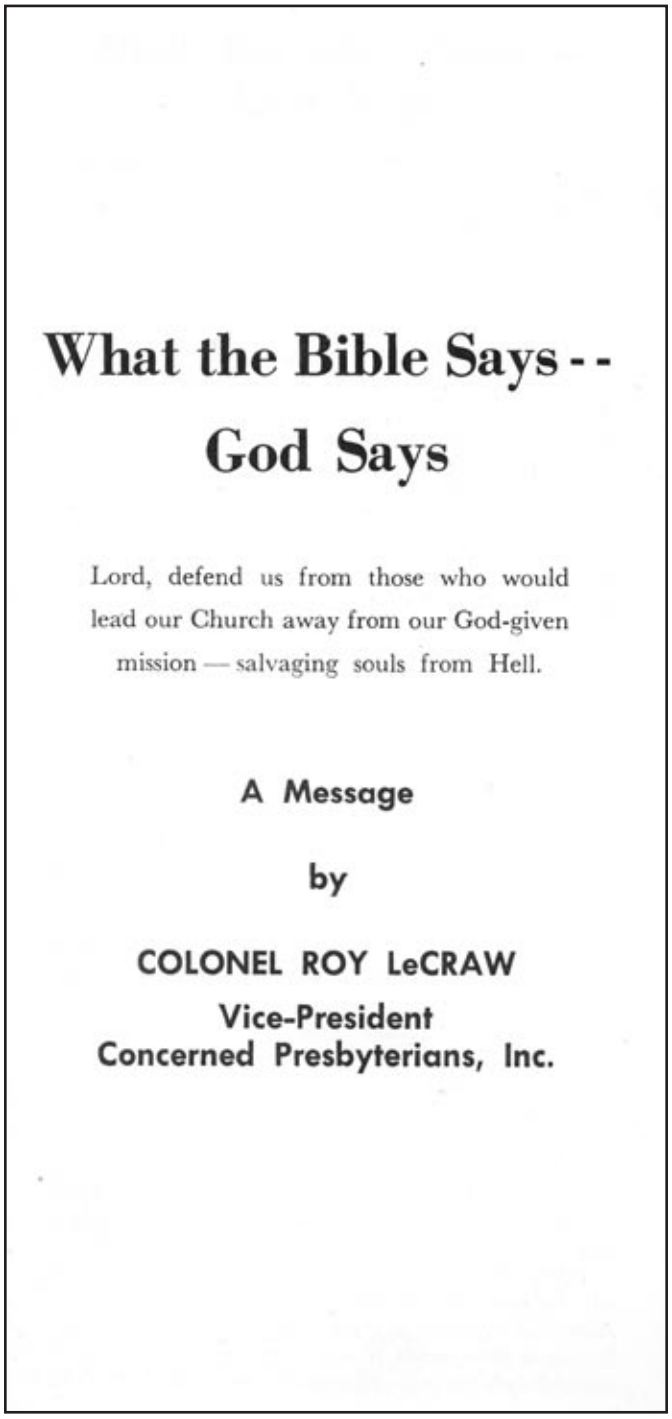
Those most opposed to the drift of the denomination were equally disenchanted with the PCUS seminaries. In fact, there had been efforts to prosecute Dr. John Leith for his teaching at Columbia Theological Seminary. Students were planted in his classes with tape recorders to provide evidence of the "heresy" he was teaching. Charges of heresy were also leveled at church historian Dr. Ernest Trice Thompson at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia. In response to their opposition to our denominational seminaries, Reformed Theological Institute (later Seminary) was created in Jackson, Mississippi. While it was and has remained independent of the Presbyterian Church in America, it became a major training ground for PCA ministers.

Schism and Chaos Within East Alabama Presbytery

All of the preceding had been underway in East Alabama Presbytery when I arrived in 1968. However, Keyes' plea notwithstanding, the presbytery was solidly in the hands of those who were convinced that it was time to create a new denomination. There were a few last-ditch efforts to regain some measure of success with their agenda at the regional and denominational level, including the aforementioned attempt to reduce our regional synod to Mississippi and Alabama. They also tried, at the 1971 General Assembly, to introduce three



"A Layman's Views on the Merger," by Kenneth S. Keyes (Weaverville, N.C.: Association for the Preservation and Continuation of the Southern Presbyterian Church, n.d.)



"What the Bible Says—God Says," a pamphlet by Colonel Roy LeCraw (Miami: Concerned Presbyterians, 1968).

nominations from the floor to replace stated nominees for the General Assembly's Permanent Nominating Committee. Kenneth Keyes records it thus:

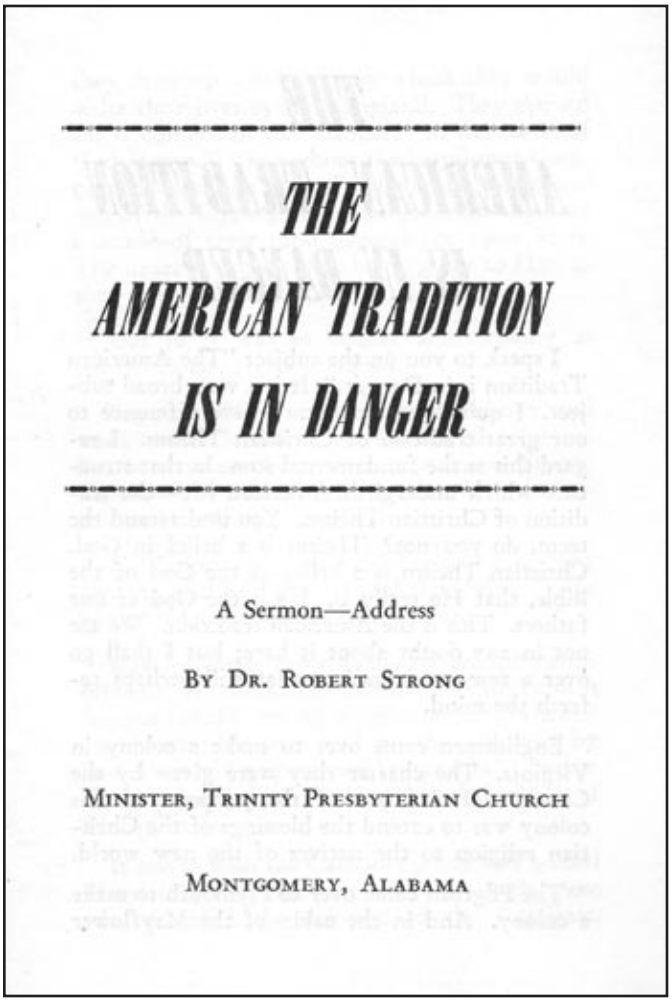
> At the 1971 General Assembly, our four conservative organizations decided to make an all-out effort to elect three conservatives to the Permanent Nominating Committee, probably the most vital single committee in the church. Our nominees were Dr. C. Darby Fulton, who had directed our Board of World Missions for many years; Walter Shepard, a former missionary; and Ruth Bell Graham (Billy Graham's wife).

Elder Jack Williamson (from *Presbyterian Life*, March 15, 1972, courtesy of *Together*).

> The Liberals nominated the layman from Charleston, West Virginia, who had given the church $50,000 to start paying for abortions; a minister from San Antonio, Texas, who held a liquor party in his room every night, invited our youth delegates and got two of them so drunk that they had to be hospitalized; and a liberal woman from Texas. It was the most radical group ever nominated for this very important committee. All three were elected.

That was a turning point. From then on, the wheels began to turn more rapidly as plans were made to create a new denomination. One of the central figures in that planning, and the execution of the plan, was aforementioned Elder Jack Williamson, an attorney from Greenville, in East Alabama Presbytery. To reiterate, Jack was secretary of Concerned Presbyterians. A "strict constructionist," especially where church government was concerned, Jack and I had many rounds of debate in presbytery meetings using the *Book of Church Order* and *Roberts Rules of Order, Newly Revised*. One thing I discovered was that if one could demonstrate to Jack that he was out of line with the *Book*, he would recant. Jack and I shared a high view of our polity, and because of that, we were at least able to claim a relationship of cordiality—which continues.

One day, in July, 1973, when the PCA plan was well underway, and many congregations were in the process of withdrawal, I happened to be in the presbytery office with Jack. At that point, another reunion vote had failed, along with a move to expand our confessional base, two key issues against which the PCA-bound group had fought hardest. I said, "Jack, reunion is dead for now. The Confession of Faith is still intact. The key objections you have voiced are not at issue now. We need you and your voice in this presbytery—and I wish



THE
AMERICAN TRADITION
IS IN DANGER

A Sermon—Address

By Dr. Robert Strong

Minister, Trinity Presbyterian Church

Montgomery, Alabama

Dr. Robert Strong delivered this sermon, "The American Tradition Is in Danger," at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Montgomery, Alabama (Montgomery: PCUS, 1970).

you would reconsider withdrawal." Jack replied, "No, Vernon. We've gotten too far down the road now." It was true. They had already scheduled the constituting assembly for the National Presbyterian Church (renamed Presbyterian Church in America) for December of that year.

The figures in our presbytery besides Jack Williamson who wielded the most power included Dr. Robert Strong, pastor of Trinity Presbyterian Church in Montgomery, Alabama—by far the largest, wealthiest church in the presbytery. Bob Strong was an elegant, suave, silver-tongued orator, who had come into the PCUS from the Orthodox Presbyterian Church when he was called to Frist Presbyterian Church, Augusta, Georgia, from whence he came to Trinity. He was not only persuasive in his own right. He had the backing of several strong elders from that congregation, including a prominent businessman, William Joseph, and the

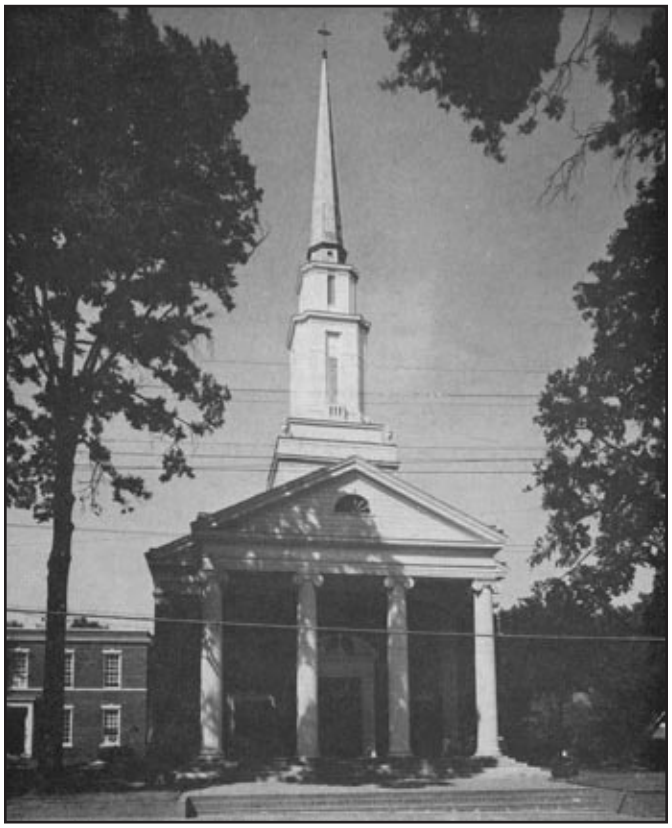
mayor of Montgomery, Emory Folmar, who ran unsuccessfully against George Wallace for governor. They were known among many of us as "Bob Strong's hit men." Other leaders of the movement toward the PCA included Donald Carson Graham, pastor of First Presbyterian church in Montgomery, formerly of the Christian Reformed Church, and Adrian DeYoung of the Dutch Reformed Church.

Much of the antipathy toward "the Northern Church" was voiced by pastors who were northerners themselves. They managed to blend their own conservative theology into a message that gave comfort to many of their people who were afraid of liberalism of any kind, and especially that of the Civil Rights Movement, which was at their doorstep. It is incontrovertible, in my judgment, that a great measure of the success of the PCA movement involved playing on not only the theological fears, but also the racial fears of their Deep South constituency. It was rarely grossly overt, but it was always there.

It was following the 1971 General Assembly that the architects of the PCA schism had begun to put flesh on the bare bones of their plan. There was early recognition that a way needed to be found for those who wished to withdraw to get out of the PCUS with their church property. It was also recognized that in presbyteries such as East Alabama it would probably be easier to get a favorable presbytery vote to dismiss than in some others where the faction did not have control. It is hard to overestimate the role my friend Jack Williamson played in drawing up the needed strategies.

Those strategies did, in fact, play out in different ways, depending on the presbytery and the circumstances. In our own presbytery, most of the action took place in a stated meeting on September 25, 1973. In that meeting, immediately following the opening worship, a complaint was filed with the presbytery by Teaching Elders George Telford, Barry VanDeventer, Don Wardlaw, John B. Evans, and Robert D. Miller, and by Ruling Elder John R. Chambless, challenging the right of a number of teaching elders and a number of elder representatives to participate in that meeting of presbytery, because they had taken public actions or made public statements tantamount to renouncing the jurisdiction of the PCUS.

Later in that meeting, charges were brought by Robert D. Miller, Leonard Woodward and J.R. Ballesteros against certain minister members for violating their vows to seek the peace of the church, by encouraging congregations to leave the PCUS. A charge was also brought against the Session of First Presbyterian Church in Greenville, Alabama, for dereliction in not exercising discipline on Elder Jack Williamson for his schismatic activities pursuant to the establishment of the PCA, specifically his accepting the chairmanship of a committee in the organization of the proposed Federation of Continuing Churches.



Trinity Presbyterian Church, Montgomery, Alabama (Congregation vertical files, RG 425, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia).

The presbytery also heard a request from the congregation of Trinity Presbyterian Church, put forward by Elder Emory Folmar, that the presbytery dissolve the pastoral relationship between Trinity and Dr. Robert Strong, after fourteen years of ministry. There was a sad irony to this request by Trinity Church. The congregation had voted to leave the PCUS. Strong, despite years of laying the groundwork theologically for those who wished to withdraw, decided not to withdraw, but he did ask Trinity for permission to stay on as pastor for a while longer. The church refused. It was as if Bob Strong had led them to the brink, persuaded them to jump, and then held back himself—and they wanted nothing further to do with him.

By this time, several "shadow" presbyteries had been created under the banner of "The Continuing Church." The first of these, Vanguard, was created in September 1972 as a kind of "at-large" presbytery to which, it was argued, any congregation or minister who wished to withdraw from the PCUS could be transferred. It was in this context that a motion was made in the presbytery "that East Alabama Presbytery give an option until March 1, 1974, to the new Presbytery of the Continuing Church or its designated representative to buy the Gulftreat property." Terms for such a sale were outlined in the motion. (Gulftreat was the camp and conference center located in Panama City, Florida, that the presbyter had owned and used for years.)

This was, of course, a transparent effort by the members of East Alabama Presbytery, who wanted to withdraw from the PCUS to sell this property to themselves after they had joined the presbytery of the Continuing Church. The PCA-bound folks had the votes, so the motion passed; however, a Notice of Appeal and Complaint was filed immediately by Robert D. Miller, and a motion was made to sustain his complaint. *The Book of Church Order* § 117-2 reads as follows:

> "*Notice of Complaint shall not have the effect of suspending the action against which the Complaint is made, unless one-third of the members present when the action was taken shall vote for its suspension until the final decision in the higher court.*"

Slightly more than one-third of those present when the action was taken did vote to sustain the complaint, which meant that the action to sell the property could not be implemented until the complaint was heard by the synod, which would not meet until the following June, 1974. Since those who wanted to take the property would be out of the PCUS by December 1973, the issue became moot, and East Alabama Presbytery retained the property.

As the packed agenda continued, Jack Williamson offered a detailed resolution that would provide for the establishment of an administrative commission with the authority to dismiss any congregation that voted by more than three-fourths of those present and voting to be dismissed from the PCUS. This motion passed, although the action was later overturned by the synod on three grounds: It actually placed the final decision in the hands of the congregation, not the presbytery, which is unconstitutional. It also failed to protect the rights of a loyal minority who wish to continue as the congregation. And it denied the constitutional right of appeal of the decision to a higher governing body.

The Division of Church Property

As the process of withdrawal from the PCUS unfolded across the church, the issue of the disposition of church property was handled in many different ways. In some cases, presbyteries voted quickly to dismiss congregations with their property. In others, congregations were formally dismissed, and they left with their property—having bought it, in effect, from the presbytery for an agreed-upon sum. This had the effect of preserving the implied trust of presbytery ownership and also provided some resources for new church development in the presbytery.

In other cases, especially where there was a loyal minority, presbyteries went to court to secure the property. In some cases the presbytery prevailed; in others it did not. In East Alabama Presbytery, the issue was raised at Trinity Church in Montgomery over the right of a small, but strong, loyal minority to remain as Trinity Presbyterian Church, PCUS. The case, styled *Corrie Hill Tankersly, et al*, was argued in Montgomery, not on the basis of implied trust, but on the central constitutional principle in our polity that it is only the presbytery that can decide who the congregation is. Since the presbytery recognized the loyal minority, not the dissident majority, the minority was the true congregation and entitled to continue to worship and do ministry there. Initially, the case was decided in favor of the presbytery and the loyal minority. In the Alabama Supreme Court, the decision was reversed "on neutral principles of law." The case was appealed by the presbytery to the U.S. Supreme Court, which refused to hear the case.

Yet another approach to this painful and difficult struggle was worked out in Opelika, Alabama, by the session and a significant number of members who wished to withdraw from the PCUS and establish another congregation. For the description that follows, I am indebted to my dear friend and fellow presbyter, the late Winston Smith.

Among the congregations that took a vote on withdrawal under the plan approved by the presbytery, only in Opelika did the vote fail to rise to the three-fourths threshold. The vote there was around

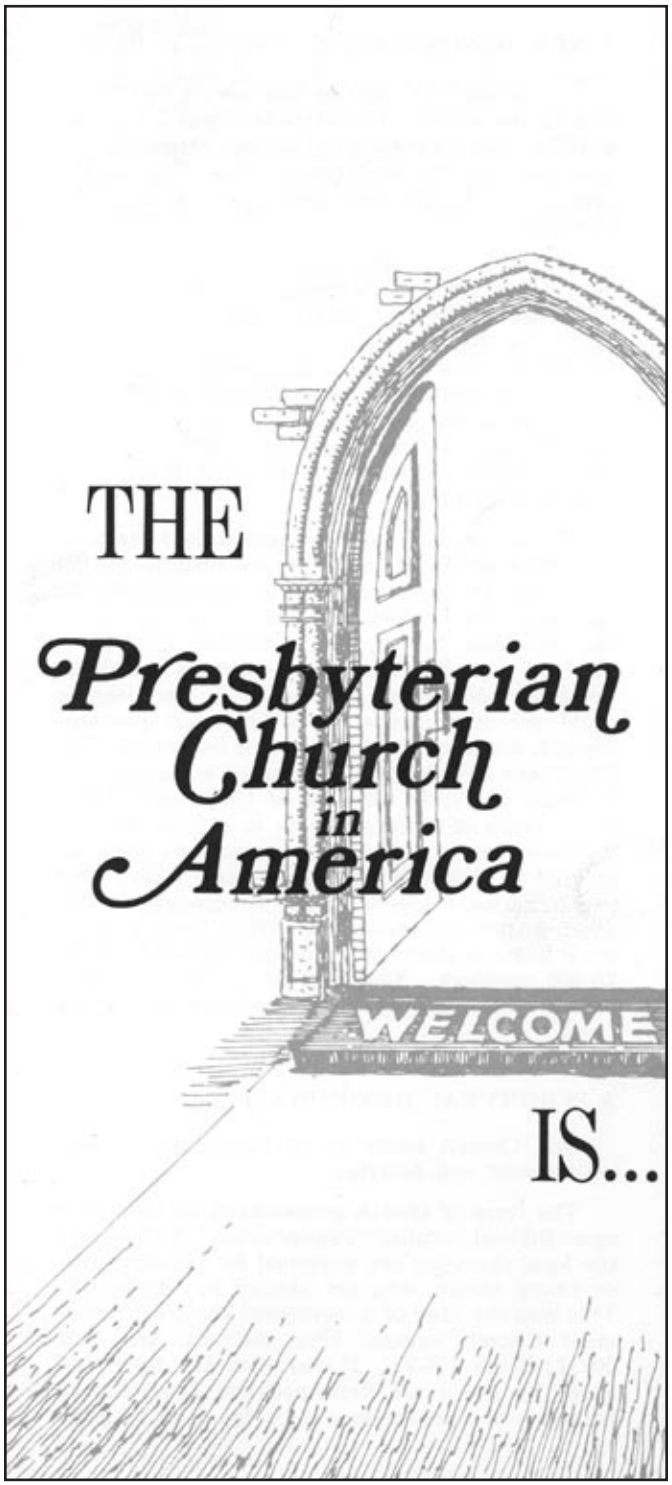
two-thirds, and Smith reported, "I remember John Holmes, the minister, announcing the vote and saying that since the vote did not reach the specified level, First Church Opelika remained a member of the PCUS." John Holmes, himself, left and went to the PCA shortly thereafter.

In the face of the split in the congregation, conversations ensued between the two groups about disposition of the church property. The loyal members, under Smith's leadership, decided to voluntarily split the building fund that the church had accumulated. They also gave the withdrawing party the manse, and according to Smith, "we also gave them half of the church equipment." In retrospect, this has turned out to be one of the least acrimonious separations.

When East Alabama Presbytery met on January 22, 1974, the administrative commission reported, and the presbytery voted to dismiss twenty-seven churches with their property to Presbytery of the Evangel. Eleven ministers were also dismissed to Evangel Presbytery, including Donald C. Graham, Harry Miller and Paul Settle. These three were dismissed with the notation that charges had been made against them that had not been adjudicated. Said charges would remain pending against a time that they might desire to return to the PCUS.

In the course of the PCA schism, the presbytery lost about half of its communicant members (Trinity would claim more than 2,000 itself) and about half of its budget. Nonetheless, the presbytery girded itself for action and within a year had started a new church development in Opp, Alabama. There is significant irony in this, given the accusations by the folks who went into the PCA that the "liberals" (which had come to mean anyone loyal to the PCUS) never did any outreach. In reality, no such new church development work had been done for years under control of the schismatics.

Our neighbor, Tuscaloosa Presbytery, had suffered similar losses to ours, so in a relatively short time, our two presbyteries got together and began to work toward a union and the creation of a new presbytery. That was accomplished with the birth of the Presbytery of John Knox. We found a new spirit, and even when we debated the hot issue of admission of baptized children to The Lord's Table, the debate was conducted with respect, with articulate biblical and theological arguments, and none of the *ad hominem* attacks or parliamentary maneuvers that so often characterized difficult debates in East Alabama Presbytery. I should note that at reunion, we had to give up the name John Knox, because the folks around Madison, Wisconsin, had seniority rights to the name. We then took the name Sheppards and Lapsley, the names of the first Presbyterian missionaries to the



A 1974 flyer for the Presbyterian Church in America (Montgomery, Ala.: Committee for Christian Education and Publications, Presbyterian Church in America, 1974).

Belgian Congo, who had roots within the bounds of the presbytery.

Concluding Observations

Having lived through this part of our history, I should like to offer a few observations, especially in light of the realities we face today in another time of schism.

Polity matters. In times of conflict within our church, our polity matters immensely. There is a great deal of talk about "essentials." For Presbyterians, our form of government is essential. I repeat: *for Presbyterians,* our polity is essential. Obviously not every Christian has to be a Presbyterian; but for one to take Presbyterian vows is to place oneself under the polity of the Presbyterian Church. And for every person who is set apart as an elder or minister of word and sacrament in the Presbyterian Church, *submission to this polity is a promise made before God.*

Why is this so critical? Precisely because we "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God" and we cannot agree to everyone's satisfaction precisely what the "theological essentials" of our faith are. We are agreed that Jesus is our Lord and Savior; that the Bible is the authoritative Word of God written; that the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper are signs and seals of inward graces from the hand of God; that (to repeat) we are all sinners in need of Christ's redemption, etc. But we have never been able to fully agree even on what these affirmations mean.

As Presbyterians, at our best, we understand that these discrepancies in our shared blurred vision (through a glass darkly), represented by our penultimate formulations of those "essentials," *push us together* rather than scattering us, so that by living out our vision of the nature of the church embodied in our polity, we are subject to one another in discovering together the fullness of God's grace.

Of course, those who have reached the arrogance of perfection in their understanding of what is essential have no need to trust anything or anyone but themselves and their own spirituality. It is such impoverished souls who, when faced with dissonance, tend to flee into what appears a more congenial place, where they find others likeminded.

It is apropos to this whole discussion to observe that those who sought to take leave of the PCUS in 1973 in order to belong to a more doctrinally pure church have themselves been troubled by division in the ensuing years.

A *PCA News* release a few years ago from the PCA General Assembly reported comments by various PCA folks about the state of the church and included a complaint from one of the elders on the Ad Interim Committee on Judicial Process that he and two others were being outvoted by the other four on the committee. "They're trying to tear down what we built…[and] rewrite the book of discipline." He went on to express his opinion that there were three groups in the PCA. The majority group consisted of people who founded the denomination. The second group was composed of those who conscientiously wanted a more hierarchical church, and the third were the "legalists, including theonomists and strict constructionists."

The report went on to quote a professor at Reformed Theological Seminary in relation to the work of a group within the PCA called "Concerned Presbyterians" (sound familiar?) which has led criticism of trends in the PCA. The organization is considered "TR"—which means "Truly Reformed."

There were other comments about those referred to in PCA circles as "the conservatives." One person said, "We've confronted them!" Others noted that the conservatives are feeling righteously God-called and committed, and that "they will wear us down." To which another responded, "We've got to wear them down before they wear us down." Finally, there was this observation by Rev. Frank Barker: "There are whole states and presbyteries controlled by 'these men' [the conservatives] and that in those places the PCA cannot make an impact. The result is no evangelism and stagnation." Barker is the longtime pastor of Briarwood Church in Birmingham, Alabama, where the PCA was formed in December 1973.

Vows matter. In the conflicts that surrounded the PCA schism, most presbyteries and congregations held together and, as far as the overall PCUS picture was concerned, "the center held." And it held because of the fact that, in general, our polity was honored. All over the PCUS, both ruling elders and teaching elders honored the vows they had made when they were ordained. In many cases, this was not the decision of choice, but it was the decision of integrity.

In reflecting on what happened in our PCUS schism and comparing it with what is happening in our Presbyterian Church (USA) today, I am struck by the cavalier way in which some ministers have simply tossed away their vows and declared that they are no longer under the jurisdiction of the

Book of Order and are subject to no ecclesiastical law or discipline but that of their own devising. Ironically, these are the same people who have insisted that ordination vows are so sacred and inviolable that they must not be available to certain members of the church family. It is incongruous, therefore, that their vows taken before God as they were set apart for ministry should be brushed aside so easily.

I want to tell you a story about how, as a young pastor, I learned about the meaning of the vows we take as Christian leaders—as Presbyterian elders.

Ordained in 1962, I was in my first pastorate in North Carolina. In 1964, there were kneel-ins going on all over the South, particularly by Black university students who were coming to try and worship in many "white" churches. One of my elders came to me and said something along the lines of, "Mr. Broyles, I don't know if you know this, but we have an action on the session minutes that says we really think it would not be helpful if Black people came to worship here at Montpelier Presbyterian Church. The reason we gave for it at the time was that we are so culturally different and have such different educational levels, we think they would really be happier out at the Spring Branch Church (the Black Baptist congregation) out at the edge of town." He went on, "These people that are coming now that might kneel-in at our church are probably better educated than most of our members. We still feel the way we do, but our old rationale doesn't work anymore, and we want to give a better thought-out reason."

Well, I was a young pastor; I hadn't even been there three years. They didn't tell me in seminary what to do at this point. Should I declare something "prophetic" such as: "If you do this, I will not get in the pulpit on Sunday morning"? Or just what? I went ahead and called the session meeting as requested. They debated the issue and reaffirmed the position they had held. I asked that my vote in the negative be recorded in the minutes, along with my theological and biblical reasons for opposing what they were doing. I left the meeting very sad, but determined to continue my ministry.

In 1965, because this kind of exclusion was still operative in many places around the PCUS, the General Assembly revised the *Book of Order* so that a new section was added. Section 201-5 said: "No one shall be excluded from participation in public worship in the Lord's house on the grounds of race, color, or class." A pastoral letter went out from the moderator saying what the assembly had done. When I got it, I called a session meeting and said, "Brethren, I think we are out of accord with the *Constitution* of our church."

We had a long and terribly painful debate and discussion. Finally, one of the elders said, "I move that we rescind our previous action and announce to the congregation that we are open for worship and membership to anyone who comes."

We all caught hell for that. I announced it from the pulpit to the congregation and, after worship, elders were cornered and people were shaking their fingers at them. Ultimately, they put a great deal of pressure on both the session and me. I did learn then that if you ever get in the place where some of the people in the congregation are trying to get rid of you, it's better for you when they try to get rid of you *and* the session!

Here is the miracle of vows kept: When that vote was taken, those eight elders voted seven to nothing, with one abstention, to approve the motion. There was not one who wanted to do it. There was not one who even thought it was the right thing to do at that point, except that the General Assembly had said this is what the rules are as long as we purport to serve God as Presbyterians in the South. It was a lesson I've never forgotten. It was built on the values of the unitary nature of the church. It wasn't just about Montpelier Church in Wagram, North Carolina. It wasn't just about Fayetteville Presbytery or the Synod of North Carolina or even the General Assembly. It was about all of us together.

It was also about that vow those elders took to be subject to brothers and sisters in the Lord. They did not balk when they came up against that. They really did believe that the true Church is found where the Word is properly preached, where the sacraments are properly administered, and here's the one we often forget—where discipline is properly exercised; discipline being for restoration and preservation, not for punishment.

Property matters. I was preparing a presentation some time ago, and I came across a scripture from Joshua 24:31 and following: "Israel served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua and had known all the work that the Lord did for Israel. The bones of Joseph, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried at Shechem, in the portion of ground that Jacob had bought from the children of Hamor, the father of Shechem, for one hundred pieces of money; it became an inheritance of the descendants of Joseph."

The history of Israel is laced with acts of remembrance, the establishment of concrete symbols that commemorate the mighty acts of God with God's people. Remember the old hymn, "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing?" Think about that verse that begins, "Here I raise my Ebenezer, hither by Thy help I'm come; And I hope, by Thy good pleasure, safely to arrive at home." When I was singing that hymn as a kid I wondered, "What in the world is an Ebenezer?" And someone finally explained to me that it was a pile of rocks that had meaning. It was a sign that the People of God had passed there under God's watchful eye. It could have been a sign to mark a place of wrestling with God. It often marked a spot where God had brought deliverance. The Scots understand it; they call it a *cairn*. And there are similar symbols in other cultures to mark special events. They are parts of a people's identity.

An "Ebenezer" is a pile of rocks. But it's not *just* a pile of rocks. And it's not a pile of rocks only denoting a past to which people are so tied they can't move forward. On the contrary, it is a reminder, every time they pass it, of their future, as well as their heritage. Just as the bones of Joseph reminded the people of Israel that they are in the lineage of Joseph and all those whom God has called, those bones also reminded them of a provident God who was leading them into the future.

Church property comes in all shapes and sizes, all ages, all states of repair. But in every case, regardless of the grandeur or the simplicity, the perfection or the state of disrepair, church property is a sign to those who worship there of the faith commitments of others who have gone before them, and also a sign of the intention of those saints to point toward a future of faithful discipleship for all who may follow. Such property is not sacred, *per se*, but when we fight over church property, we are not simply fighting over dirt and bricks and mortar and stuff like that, or about the monetary value of a particular piece of real estate. In a way, we're struggling to preserve a kind of Ebenezer that points to far more than those of us who are involved.

The Body Matters. Perhaps the hardest thing for all for us to learn from the conflicts that trouble the Church in all generations, irrespective of denomination or location around the world, is that all power in heaven and on earth belongs to God. We are invited to be humble recipients of a measure of that gracious power, for the sake of the world and all those who share a place with us in Christ's body.

Paul declares: "Now you *are* [emphasis added] the body of Christ and individually members of it" (I Corinthians 12:27). He also says in the same epistle to that fractured Corinthian Christian community: "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and the blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the Lord's body, eat and drink judgment upon themselves" (I Corinthians 11:27-29).

I am persuaded that Paul's admonition about discerning the Lord's body is not so much an admonition regarding Christ's presence in the elements of the supper, but is focused on discerning Christ's body as it is incarnate in those around the table. There is only one body. There is only one table.

There is tragic arrogance at work when one member of the body declares that another does not belong. That is the basis of all schism, and it mimics, in a real sense, the first act of disobedience—the will to know as much as God, to know with certainty, as some seem to, who belongs at the table and who does not.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us in *Life Together,* whether we like it or not, whether we like *each other* or not, we have been made one in Christ's death and resurrection. We dare not test God by fighting one another over who sees that Truth most clearly; or worse, deciding who truly belongs and who does not.