

Called to Leadership in the Presbyterian Church

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John 3: 1-21; Titus 3: 3-8

Did you know that the difference between Old School and New School Presbyterian theology created this congregation in 1832? I am very grateful for the opportunity to be with you again today. This has given me the opportunity to dig again into your church history which fascinates me. I want to share with some reflections on your church history. Then I want to tease out some thoughts from this history which may be helpful for our church leaders today.

The classic theological question which was at the center of the complex set of issues which created this church has to do with the order of salvation. The vital theological concept which was at the center of the whole complex situation which created your church is “regeneration.” “Regeneration” is an old theological word which we would probably call “Christian conversion” today. What comes first in the order of salvation? Specifically when does regeneration, or Christian conversion, occur? Presbyterians of a traditional style held fast to the idea that regeneration occurs before faith and thus before any evidence of it in a person’s life. Within came to be called Old School Presbyterian theology. There is a very different thought which affirms a person may take steps in behavior and belief in their own life which then leads to their regeneration. This is a very different style of theology and was called New School theology. The conflict between Old School and New School Theology created this church.

This is a profoundly important theological issue. This question is all about evangelism and mission. In the first half of the 1800s, before the Civil War, the United States were growing quickly. In these years after the War of 1812 and before the Civil war in the 1860s, America was booming. The economy was growing quickly, the population was growing quickly, and there was a huge push to the west. Lewis and Clark had already captured our imagination, and in this era the Texas territory, California and Oregon territory were all added to the United States. The profound new technologies of that era were the telegram and the railroads which were connecting everyone together. As the nation pushed west, the Church realized the opportunity for evangelism and mission as part of that push.

But we need a theological and spiritual strategy for growing the church. How do we help people realize and understand their Christian faith? How do we plant new churches? This is truly the foundational question beneath the Old School and New School schism in the

Presbyterian Church, and between First and Second Churches here in Carlisle. Rev. George Duffield had an answer to this question. Rev. George Duffield started service as the pastor of THE Presbyterian Church in Carlisle in 1816.

Duffield preached stirring and powerful sermons which encouraged people to change their lives, change their behavior, make a new start in their lives, and make a commitment to live as Christians. And if you do that, God will bless you with regeneration and salvation in Christ. There was an emotional, revivalist, New School tone to Duffield's preaching.

There were at that time many very devout and strong Presbyterians who did not like this emphasis on our behavior, on our ability to change, or on our own desire to make a Christian commitment. These, of course, were the Old School Presbyterians, your ancestors. They were very uncomfortable with Duffield's emphasis on individual ability and power. That emphasis seemed to diminish a proper emphasis on the glory, sovereignty, and power of God.

In my mind this is the heart of a crucial and still important question. As we move into regeneration, as we become new people in Christ, as we are blessed with conversion and new faith; was it we ourselves who acted first, or was it God who acted first? This question is the New School Old School debate in the Presbyterian Church. Ponder this in your own life. If you have moved to faith, to Christian commitment, to service and devotion to the church how did you get there? Did you make decisions and commitments that got you to faith? Or maybe God moved in your life, with mystery and power, which led you and called you to faith? Which is it? Are you Old School or New School Presbyterians?

I also need to introduce you to another George. George Armstrong Lyon was born in Carlisle on April 11, 1784. George Lyon's father, William, was a very prominent Presbyterian in Carlisle and one of the original leaders of Dickinson College. George Lyon followed his parent's prominence in Carlisle. He operated a very successful law practice, and also was president of a local bank. George Lyon married Anna G. Savage in June 1815 and the couple had five daughters and four sons. He served as a member of the Dickinson College Board of Trustees. Like his parents he was very active in the Presbyterian Church in Carlisle. George Lyon was Old School Presbyterian. He was sitting in the Presbyterian pews listening to New School preacher George Duffield.

There you have it: Rev. George Duffield versus Elder George Lyon and the great Presbyterian controversy which formed this congregation. This story fascinates me. I want to use some themes of that story as a foundation to say a word to the officers and leaders in this congregation today. Please allow me to pull out some themes and dimensions of this history which I hope we may build on today. In fact I would like to use Elder George Lyon as my example and witness. (A simple side note: he and his wife had nine children. I would love to

meet any members of this family that are still around today, especially if they are still connected with this congregation. My information about George Lyon only comes from reading your history. I do not know anything about his personality, or his spirituality, what motivated him and what kind of man he was.)

One: We need theologically sophisticated church leaders and officers:

One thing we know for sure from the historical record is that Elder George Lyon was theologically very engaged. The church today is crying out for theologically engaged officers and leaders. Leaders in our church today must become biblically literate, theologically sophisticated and spiritually engaged with the work of God. The church is suffering because we have allowed theology to become an academic credential, instead of the language and currency of the whole church. We act as if only pastors know theology and do theology. We act as if pastors, by their education and training, have some kind of special relationship with God and unique understanding of the ways of God. Theology, and theological reflection, is not an academic credential. Theology belongs to the church. For example, church leaders: do you realize and understand what was at stake in the Old School New School controversy? Do you realize how fresh and relevant those same questions are today?

Elder George Lyon was a very theologically engaged church elder and leader. He knew what he believed and he was very in tune with the movements, themes and changes in theological reflection in his day, and in his world. Being an officer in this church – an elder, a deacon, or a trustee – is not, first of all, about running the church. Being a leader in the church is primarily about discerning, understanding and proclaiming together what God is doing in your midst.

Two: Do not allow yourselves to be a clergy dominated church:

This church was created, planted by a group of theologically sophisticated and passionate Elders and laypeople led by Elder George Lyon. The people, and especially the officers, must claim and take responsibility for the church. It is your church. I know where I am. I am saying this in the midst of one of most effective congregations in our presbytery which has an amazing professional staff. I know Jeff; he has remarkable positive energy, vision, and growing energy. You are blessed with his service here. I know Jennifer; she is a remarkably warm and caring pastor. As good and effective and skilled as they are, this is not the Jeff and Jennifer Church. This is your church – officers and leaders – claim it, own it.

Because this congregation is so healthy and robust, you probably are not aware of the issue that is at stake here. We as a denomination have become dominated by clergy. Deep in the culture and values of our church is the conviction that every church must have a full-time,

professionally trained pastor. We have created a church culture which is almost fully dependent on this model. We have created a style of being the church that depends on the work of a full time paid professional. The problem is that we do not know how to be church any other way. Spiritually and theologically we must begin to break this complete dependence on full time professional staff. What is the church? Who is the church?

This is a great thinking exercise for your session and church leaders: What kind of church would you be, what would you do, how would you function if you did not have any professional staff? Remember Elder George Lyon: he and seventy other members petitioned our Presbytery to start a new church, this church. They did not have any professional staff leading the way. This was a group of church members who started a new church. Who is the church? What is the church?

Three: Live in a larger church.

What is very fascinating to me about the story of George Duffield and George Lyon is how quickly their debate became a Presbytery debate, and then immediately connected with similar theological and spiritual concerns in the whole Presbyterian Church. That was an era of a much more immediate and profound connectionalism. I yearn for that deeply connected church culture.

Today, despite all the travel and information technology that allows us to be connected, we are a very disconnected church. I would argue that most people in our churches today, most of you, live a Christian life that is almost fully contained with the walls of your congregation. For most of us our whole Christian life, all of our Christian service, our Christian identity and almost the full expression of our Christian spirituality is contained within our congregation. Sadly, this is also very true for many of our pastors.

I want to ponder this in two ways. First of all, we are by our history and heritage, a connectional church. Our connectionalism is my job. We are not supposed to be individual congregations, but we are supposed to be connected together in mission and ministry. The presbytery is the frontline of our connectionalism. But our connectionalism is today almost completely broken down. Few people have a passion or engagement with our connectionalism. Few people have any idea what the presbytery is. For George Lyon and the people of his era, our connectionalism was part of their identity as Christians. Connectionalism was their lifeblood.

We are living in a day when our connectionalism is being completely reinvented and redefined. On most days this deeply motivates me. It is very exciting to be part of this great reinvention of the church. What does it mean to be a connectional church? What does it mean to be Presbyterians? But also, on my bad days, I am discouraged about this task. I am very

concerned that we simply do not have enough leaders engaged in this question. I believe that being connected together as a presbytery and as a General Assembly is vital. But I am concerned that without enough leadership, without enough passion and energy from our church leaders on this question, we are destined to simply become a list of individual congregations each doing their own thing, in their own way, all alone.

I also want to ponder this from an even larger perspective. Today in our world there is happening one of the greatest missionary movements in the history of the church. This huge missionary movement does not include us. It does not include any Americans. The greatest missionary movement in the history of the church is South Korean Presbyterians reaching out boldly in the name of Jesus Christ into China. It is very probable that we will wake up one day very soon and realize that China has become a predominantly Christian nation and culture. Here we sit in America, in our cozy and comfortable churches, and most of us do not even know that is going on. In the name of Jesus Christ I believe it is vital to connect our churches with what God is doing in churches all around the world.

I want to finish with this question of whether or not you are New School or Old School Presbyterians. Actually I want to share with you Jeff's answer to this question. Last summer, as I hope you know, Jeff served for a week as the chaplain for summer camp at Camp Krislund. During that week the camp counselors were very excited because something like 15 campers had accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. For the last worship service that week, Jeff reflected on this. Jeff said, "I learned that many of you have accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. Thank the Lord. That is wonderful and amazing." What Jeff did not say, but we both know, is that this language about accepting Jesus as your Lord and Savior is New School Presbyterian language. But Jeff did say, "I hope you all will think about that a little bit. I imagine, if you stop and think about it, God may have been acting in your life for a long time. God was acting when your parents had you baptized, and God was acting through your Sunday School teachers, and God was acting through the church that you grew up in. Some of you may have accepted Jesus Christ for the first time; and for some of you God has been acting in your life for a long time and you may just be starting to recognize it." Jeff did not say, but we both know, that this language about God working in your life forever is Old School Presbyterian language.

What is most important is what Jeff said next. He said, "Whether you accepted Jesus Christ for the first time or whether Jesus has been working in your life forever is not what is most important. What is most important is this question: "What are you going to do now?" My friends, Elders, Deacons, Trustees, faithful church members, what are you going to do now? Amen!