

Preface

THE IMPETUS FOR THIS PROJECT came from a larger historical work in which I have been engaged for over three years now, tentatively titled *For a Continuing Church: Conservative Dissent in the Presbyterian Church in the United States, 1934–1974*. That larger work focuses on the conservative movement within the southern Presbyterian church that led to the formation of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), the denomination of which I am a part. That work could be viewed as a type of historical archeology; in it, I attempt to seek out the lineaments of the “conservative Presbyterian mind” by uncovering many of the bones of its history in the subterranean layers of Presbyterian newspapers and old personal files, church session records, and General Assembly minutes. As I have been doing this work, the questions that I have kept in the forefront of my mind are: How did the PCA come to be the way it currently is? What is the connection between the way the conservative movement in the old southern Presbyterian church developed and the way the PCA lives and breathes as a church of God doing kingdom business today?

These historical questions have led me to a more pressing question which I have faced as a teaching elder in the PCA: Do conservative Presbyterian churches, as represented in my denomination, embrace their Presbyterian identity? Or do other ideas, practices, and narratives serve to shape them? One way to read the history of the PCA, which I will explore more fully in my larger historical argument, is a movement, by fits and starts, from an essentially conservative evangelical, or even fundamentalist, identity to one that is more distinctively Presbyterian. In other words, one could read the

x

history of the PCA as an attempt to answer the question: What does it mean to be a (conservative) Presbyterian in the postmodern age?

It is no wonder that conservative Presbyterians wrestle with this issue today. The past thirty years, which coincide with the whole of the PCA's existence thus far, have not been friendly to denominations of any stripe. On the one side is the extreme hemorrhaging of the old-line Protestant denominations. And on the other side is the rapid growth of nondenominational or loosely affiliated churches. Nowhere is this contrast better illustrated than in Louisville, Kentucky, where I lived for several years. Louisville is the home of the Presbyterian Church (USA) headquarters, with its bloated bureaucracy and public hand-wringing over membership losses. But it is also the home of one of the largest nondenominational churches in America, Southeast Christian Church, with a membership of over twenty-two thousand; on Easter Sunday in 2003, Southeast drew over thirty-five thousand attendees, dwarfing the attendance of all the old-line Protestant churches in the city put together.

This trend toward nondenominationalism has produced several responses. From within old-line Protestantism, there have been a number of books seeking to shore up denominational identity. In the late 1980s, for example, Lilly Endowment Inc., sponsored a series of six books, called *The Re-forming Tradition*, which sought to address the old-line Protestant decline as it played out within the PC (USA). More recently, the PC (USA) publishing house has offered books such as *To Be a Presbyterian* (1996), *What Unites Presbyterians: Common Ground for Troubled Times* (1997), *Presbyterians: A Spiritual Journey* (2000), *Being Presbyterian in the Bible Belt* (2000), and *This We Believe: Eight Truths Presbyterians Affirm* (2002). Still, the church loses members at an astonishing rate. In other denominations, such as the Southern Baptist Convention, this search for identity has been pronounced. Two books titled *Why I Am a Baptist* were published within a year of each other by rival groups within that denomination, each presenting a different vision of Baptist identity. Likewise, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod

P R E F A C E

recently published *Why I Am a Lutheran* (2004) in an effort to explain to insiders and outsiders what Lutheranism is all about.

Within conservative Presbyterianism, there have been differing responses. The PCA, for example, spent several years developing a strategic plan for the denomination, which was finally presented at the 2003 General Assembly. However, it is not clear that the plan has widely impacted denominational life outside the church's offices in Atlanta. At the local level, a number of PCA churches leave "Presbyterian" out of their name, for fear of being confused with the much more theologically progressive PC (USA). This move has the by-product of making PCA churches look and feel more like nondenominational churches. Others re-traditionalize conservative Presbyterians by emphasizing their difference with mainstream evangelicalism to such a degree that "evangelical" becomes a dirty word. Still others, both within and outside the PCA, claim that being Reformed is not enough, leading to revisions of Presbyterian worship and doctrine in directions suggested more by Vatican II and postliberal theology than by John Calvin, the Westminster Assembly, or even American Presbyterian history. Hence, the quest for a conservative Presbyterian identity has either moved *toward*, *away from*, or *beyond* evangelicalism, especially as represented in its nondenominational or parachurch forms.

The question of identity becomes particularly pressing on the local level, as people from other Protestant traditions join a conservative Presbyterian church. The common story for many PCA members is that they were raised in baptistic churches, came to Christ there or in other venues, came to understand "the doctrines of grace," and found those doctrines taught clearly in a PCA church, which they then joined. Yet many of our church members, and even some officers, do not have a solid understanding of what it means to be Presbyterian. In exchanging one church for another, they have not yet learned the narratives, distinctives, and practices of their new spiritual home. As a result, our members often find themselves somewhat at a loss to explain to their friends and families why they belong to a Presbyterian church and why their friends should come and join their church as well.

xii

This book is meant, then, as a primer on Presbyterian identity. It is not written for specialists or scholars; it is written for church members, ministerial candidates, ruling elders, and, especially, potential Presbyterians. This is not a polemical work promoting a particular point of view in areas where conservative Presbyterians have legitimate differences of opinion (for example, in the area of worship styles). Rather, I intend to stick fairly closely to the Bible, PCA constitutional documents, and official position papers in laying out what Presbyterians believe, do, and say about themselves. In the “For Further Reading” sections, I will list books that represent a wider-range of perspectives and allow the reader to explore issues more deeply on his or her own. And since this book is meant to be useful for new members’ classes as well as for Sunday school or officer training venues, I have provided questions for thought and review at the end of each chapter. In addition, individual class workbooks and teacher’s PowerPoint slides can be downloaded for free from my Web site, www.seanmichaellucas.com.

I also do not intend to maximize the differences between Presbyterians and other evangelicals. As I see it, the label “evangelical” means to communicate a certain “gospel-oriented” attitude or style; evangelicals recognize the world-historical significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for their lives and they long for others to enjoy communion with him. This recognition that the gospel of Jesus changes everything lends a certain style to the ministry of “evangelical” churches, regardless of confessional stance or label used. Presbyterians are evangelicals in that we have a gospel orientation which expresses itself in our preaching, witnessing, and life together. That being said, as Presbyterians, we have some perspectives and practices that are different from other evangelicals; we also have a story that is part of the “evangelical” story, but distinct as well. Recognizing the differences will help in understanding what it means to be Presbyterian.

No one ever makes an important journey alone. I am no exception. My parents, Steve and Susan Lucas, are also now members of a PCA congregation, having come through their own journey to this place.

P R E F A C E

Though we did not start out Presbyterian, I am thankful for their love for the triune God and his Word, leading us all on this journey, though by different paths. I am also grateful for the support of my parents-in-law, Ron and Phyllis Young, who are not Presbyterian but who remind us of the love of Christ and the larger communion of the saints.

Important also have been those friends who have provided encouragement along the way. Steve Nichols, my dear friend from seminary, has been part of this journey as well. D. G. Hart, my mentor at Westminster Theological Seminary, taught me to love the Presbyterian stories. Bruce Keisling supported my work as I went through deep waters. Shawn Slate, Jonathan Medlock, and John Roberts all lived out Presbyterianism with and for me. My friends and colleagues at Covenant Theological Seminary have taught me about grace-centered Presbyterianism; it has been a delight to be here. Wayne Sparkman, director of the PCA Historical Center, lent me a hand often in the course of writing. I am grateful to Bryan Chapell, D. G. Hart, Robert Peterson, and Michael Williams, who read parts of this book in its early stages and gave valuable feedback.

I thank those churches that have been willing to interact with this material. In this regard, I especially thank my friends at Community Presbyterian Church (PCA), Louisville, Kentucky, where this project had its first incarnation, and The Covenant Presbyterian Church (PCA), St. Louis, Missouri, whose interaction led to a refinement of the material. I have been blessed to serve both of these churches as well as to learn Presbyterianism at the feet of two fine churchmen and pastors, David Dively and George Robertson.

In God's grace, my family worships within the bounds of the PCA. With deep gratitude, this book is dedicated to my wife, Sara, who told me when we first were married not to leave her behind in my intellectual and spiritual travels, but always to make sure we walked side by side. It was a wise charge, and, by God's grace, we have walked this way together. What she may not realize is that in God's providence I could not have walked this way without her. Our four covenant children—Samuel, Elizabeth, Andrew, and Benjamin—have joined us in this journey, memorizing catechisms, learning hymns from the Trin-

xiv

ity and RUF Hymnals, singing psalms from the Trinity Psalter, and participating in the life of the visible church. It is my prayer that our life together will lead them to teach their own children about the beliefs, practices, and stories that we as Presbyterians hold dear—especially the graceful gospel of our Lord Jesus—

that the next generation might know [it],
the children yet unborn,
and arise and tell [it] to their children
so that they should set their hope in God. (Ps. 78:6–7a)

P R E F A C E