

## Dear Friends of the Foundation:

Some of you have been kind to point out to me that the broad stroke distinctions I attempted to make between the **Old School** and **New School** divisions of the Presbyterian Church in a recent email may have been too broad to have been helpful.

Let me offer some more balanced and, I hope, more helpful observations on this from John H. Leith, *An Introduction to the Reformed Tradition: A Way of Being the Christian Community*, revised edition (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981):

Inordinate love of the past, the repetition of dead traditions as laws for contemporary life, the refusal to change are clearly destructive ways of life. Yet change in itself is not necessarily good. The future is not automatically an open door to inevitable progress. The wisdom of the past has not been outdated because it is the integrity that has been wrested out of actual human experience. Human nature is still human nature. The temptation of the liberal spirit to reject all traditions uncritically deprives the church of a great resource for facing the future. A more productive procedure is to test the traditions and in particular the ones by which we live; all traditions must continually be critically reviewed and open to self-reformation. They must live and develop not only in terms of their own internal principles but also in dialogue, even debate and confrontation, with other traditions, movements, and events. One of the great achievements of the ecumenical movement has been the catholicizing of the theological enterprise. Good theologians read their own theological tradition in the context of the theology of the whole church. The church must also learn not only from those who love her but from those who reject her as, for example, Marxists in our time.

The living and open tradition of the church has its liberal and conservative components. It has assimilated in a living way the wisdom of the past, and it is open to the future. The living tradition of the church is the indispensable link between the believing community today and the events, witness, and interpretation that are its origin. A historian of doctrine as put it very well. Tradition is the living faith of dead people. Traditionalism is the dead faith of living people. For this reason tradition is a source of the church's vitality and traditionalism the occasion of its death. ...

The temptation was always great, even for the Presbyterians and Puritans from England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales, to perpetuate in America the forms and customs of the old church in the new land. The Old Side-New Side split in American Presbyterianism (1741-1758) was in part over the question of whether American Presbyterians would be responsive to the new situation or committed to reproduction of the Scottish church. The New Side far outstripped the Old Side because it had accommodated itself to the new situation. The experiences of the Great Awakenings, denominational pluralism, and a voluntary church in a free society all left their imprint on the churches of the Reformed tradition in America. The pragmatic and experimental bias of American culture also shaped theology and church life. The traditions were alive, and they continued to grow in a new situation without losing continuity with their

history in another culture. A too-persistent endeavor to perpetuate the old in a new situation and a too-eager enthusiasm for adopting the new in place of the old alike proved sterile and nonproductive. (pp. 30-31, 49-50)

Thank you.

Grace and Peace,

Jim

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