AN ACCOUNT OF THE GREAT "TWO-LINES" CONTROVERSY

ROBERT R. MCBRIDE

A celebrated bit of local church lore in Pittsburgh is the story of the division of a church over the momentous question of reading out two lines of the psalm for the congregation to sing, instead of the time-honored one-line method. Although historians have long known that the incident took place at the Associate Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh, apparently it has been too good a tale to resist and has been claimed, fondly, by others. The dispute is commonly given as the cause for the withdrawal of the members of the First Presbyterian Church to create the Second Presbyterian in 1803.

A contemporary account is contained in the *Session Book of the Associate Church, 1809-1819,* in the minutes recorded by the minister, Robert Bruce.[1] The book is included among the records of the Associate Presbyterian Church's successor, the First United Presbyterian Church (now Bellefield Presbyterian), but it was not used by Dr. William J. Reid when he wrote his centennial history of that church in 1901, so presumably it was not then available. Its whereabouts in the interim are unknown.

The newly found record makes it possible to amplify the account given in Dr. Reid's history and to correct some errors, the most surprising of which is that the dispute is now seen to have arisen in 1816, two years earlier than previously thought. Unfortunately, during the time of the dispute the minutes recorded by Dr. Bruce become infrequent after the appointment of John Roseburgh as clerk on July 9, 1817, although they include some meetings at which Mr. Roseburgh was present. None of Mr. Roseburgh's minutes are extant, nor are the records for some twenty years subsequent to Dr. Bruce's record. The available evidence on the two-lines question, therefore, can be quickly summarized.

As with other Presbyterian churches on the frontier, the Associate

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1 The second minister, 1808-46, and the moderator mentioned in the *Minutes.* He was also principal of the Western University, 1820-43.

Church (or Seceders) sang only psalms, without accompaniment. There were no books available for the congregation, few of whom could have read them anyway, so a leader read out each line for the congregation to sing back. The rhymed texts and tunes were traditional, collected in the old Scottish psalter of Francis Rous first published in 1643, familiar to many members from Scotland or, more often, Ireland. Use of different texts or tunes was frowned upon, even in private. Even after the session rebuffed the complaints against the "two-lines and the New Musick," the records note the appointment of a committee to investigate a report that a member "Sang Watts' Psalms in his family."

The election of new precentors, who were the leaders of the singing, at the annual congregational meeting in early 1816, precipitated the controversy when they introduced new tunes and read two lines together. An undated entry records a prompt outcry to the session, which thought itself incompetent to overrule the congregation, but was sufficiently impressed by the "noise and dissatisfaction" to recommend returning to reading one line. The majority of the congregation seems not to have been so dissatisfied, since the following year they elected one of the offending precentors to be an elder, despite his having repeated the offence. An anonymous protester considered that the sin was so heinous that it not only disqualified the precentor, but also another elder-elect who had merely supported his right to read two lines. This complaint was promptly rebuffed, but yet a third turbulent year came. In February 1818, the congregation again elected a two-liner, and again the conservative faction protested to no avail. By this time, the dispute was so great that it was brought to the attention of the presbytery, which advised returning to one line until the matter could be considered at its meeting, July 7, 1818. At this meeting a libel (in ecclesiastical courts, a written statement by a plaintiff of his cause of action and of the relief he seeks) was presented by members of the congregation against Dr. Bruce, charging him with "tyrannical acts as moderator of session, in refusing to grant a hearing to a petition from certain members of his congregation." [2] This libel was declared "Not Relevant," but an appeal was taken to the synod (then the highest

2 Dr. William J. Reid, *History of the First United Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh* (Pittsburgh, 1901), 13. Dr. Reid says that the libel was signed by James Young, John Keating, John Aiken, John Roseburgh, William Woods, and Thomas May. This is clearly erroneous, since they constituted the entire session (except William Bell), and Mr. Roseburgh was the offending precentor. Mr. Aiken (Aitken, Aitkens) was doubtless a leading libellant.

court of the denomination) at its meeting in Pittsburgh in May 1819. After a long discussion, the synod ruled "That it is most expedient to dismiss the affair without passing judgment on the merits of the case."[3] With this inconclusive ruling, the majority two-liners won the day, and the diehards withdrew from the Pittsburgh church.

Since even the most dogged opponent of the two-lines, Mr. John Aiken, admitted there was no question of principle involved, the determination with which the question was pursued over so many years, against the minister and the majority of the congregation and into the high courts of the church, is hard to understand. It can be ascribed only to that peculiar conservatism that afflicts some churchmen, who become unwilling to let the most petty changes occur in familiar ritual, even when the old customs arose for no better reason than the lack of books on the frontier. And, perhaps, there was an element of plain Scotch-Irish stubbornness. Even harder to imagine is what the singing was like, starting and stopping with every line, and without instrumental help. Perhaps enthusiasm overcame the obstacles, but one is left wondering whether the anonymous complainant who thought all music only "tickled the ears," had much of an ear to be tickled.

The Associate Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh became the First United Presbyterian Church with the merger of the Associate and Associate Reformed denominations in Pittsburgh in 1858.[4] The similarity of names with the First Presbyterian Church is doubtless responsible for the story being transferred to the latter church, first mentioned in 1867 in D. A. McKnight's *History of First Presbyterian Church Sabbath Schools*. Even there the story that the dispute caused the withdrawal of members to form the Second Presbyterian Church does not appear in the relevant section but is only in an after-inserted footnote dealing with a later quarrel over starting a choir. As there is no mention of such an event in the records of either the First or Second Presbyterian Church, it appears that the account contained in the following minutes is the basis for the story.

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3 Ibid. The printed minutes of the synod meeting contain no reference to the case, a point of interest as Dr. Bruce was a member of the committee to select portions of the minutes for printing.

4 The First United Presbyterian in turn hosted the general assembly of that denomination for the merger with the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. in 1958 and was subsequently merged with nearby Bellefield Presbyterian, under which name it continues.

Excerpts from the Manuscript Minutes of the Session of the Associate Presbyterian Congregation of Pittsburgh, 1809-19

(Undated, Summer of 1816)

Session met members present John Aitkens,[5] Jas Young,[6] Jas. Glover[7] & Ths Mays.[8]

The moderator asked what bussiness came before the Session, it was answered that the noise and dissatisfaction prevailing in the Congregation respecting the reading of two lines together by Jas Liggett[9] one afternoon on Sabbath, and by Mr Roseburgh[10] on the monday after the sacrament were so great that something ought to be done by the session to pacify the people and to heal the Congregation. The moderator remarked that he was astonished that this should be the case, since it was a thing common in many congregations of the Secession; and included no relinquishment of principle to read two lines together and then to sing them. He further remarked that he did not consider the Session competent to decide on the affair; that if there was a necessity for taking a vote upon it, this ought to be in the congregation. Mr Aitkens replied that he thought otherwise; and remarked that the the [*sic*] Moderator (his sentiments being known in the congregation) had given so much offence, and lost the affections of the people to such a degree by it that it would be a long time indeed before he would recover them. The moderator (after remarks on his views respecting this state of the congregation) still urges that all that could possibly be competent to the Session to do was to declare their mind respecting the expediency of introducing such a method in the mean time. A vote was then taken on this view of the subject and it carried unanimously, Not expedient. Mr Young in particular concurred in admitting that this Session could not legislate on the practice so as authoratatively to contemn it.

The Session was closed with prayer.

R Bruce Clk

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5 Tallow chandler and earlier high constable. (Occupations are from the *Pittsburgh City Directory* of 1815 and 1819, the *Pittsburgh Gazette,* and church records.) The church had a notable affinity for law enforcement; the eight elders included the sheriff, constable, and a justice of the peace, as well as a member of city council. Another justice of the peace was a trustee, Philip Mowry.

6 Justice of the peace.

7 Blacksmith and silversmith who became a prominent landholder in Butler County.

8 Probably associated with James Mays, dealer in boats and a trader.

9 Trustee, cabinet maker.

10 Carpenter, member Pittsburgh City Council, subsequently elder and treasurer of the Associate Synod of North America.

April 19th, 1817

Session met members present John Aitken, Jas. Young, James Glover and John Keting.[11]

The Mod. mentioned that the principal object for which the Session had met was the examination of Elders-elect; and on enquiring whether any objections were laid in to session against any of them Mr Aitken pulled from his pocket two papers that were open, and to which there were no signatures.

A question arose respecting the disposal of these papers, and it was remarked that as they were anonimous they could not be admitted. Mr Aitken replied that a name could be got to them, and that he was authorised to tell the name of the writer, if it were insisted on. The Mod. replied that no such procedure could possibly be admitted; that no member of the congregation ought to treat this session as if they were fools but that every member that feels himself agrieved ought to come honestly forward and state in his own name his complaints.

There appeared a desire in Session to know the contents of the papers, and the Session being considered in the light of a committee by intimation from the chair they were read. — the purport of the papers was that two of the Elected Elders were in the view of the writer disqualified from holding the office of Elder — because one of them had one evening sung as Clerk by reading two lines together of the psalm, and the other in a conversation had vindicated the propriety of doing so. The papers then went on to reason against all singing in the public worship of God by stating that all kinds were indifferent and that all tickled the ear only. The Session in committee returned the papers into Mr. Aitken's hand, with this remark from the chair that more of a christian disposition was expected from the writer in future in his papers. Mr. Aitken remarked that it was against singing that the writer appeared to speak, but he believed that it was the two lines and the New Musick that he intended to speak against.

Pittsburgh, Feby 10th, 1818

Session met members present John Keting, John Roseburgh, John Aitken, Jas. Young, Thos. Mays and Wm. Woods.[12]—Appointed the first thursday in March next to be observed as a day of fasting in the congregation.

John Aitken presented a paper signed by a number of members

11 Agriculturalist.

12 Sheriff, Allegheny County.

in communion purporting to protest against the late election of the Clerk in the Congregation as unconstitutional and complaining of two lines being read by him in the time of singing; and also of new tunes being sung. The moderator remarked after reading over the paper that it could not be regularly admitted as a subject of discussion in Session. The paper applied for a redress of grievances originating as supposed in a late congregational appointment; and as the protest was not entered before the congregational meeting as declaratory of disapprobation against its decision . . . nor followed by an appeal from its judgment, the session could only extrajudicially consult together, and come to some conclusion by way of advice to the members complaining, about the method of the congregation's redressing its own grievances by rectifying its errors,—That to admit the paper was a relevant paper, would (word crossed out) lead the Session into the dilemma of either condemning the late congregational meeting, or of approving its decision; and if they did condemn it, the people who were present at it were condemned unheard, and a congregational meeting might in future have its decisions reversed at any time at the pleasure of Session; and if they justified the congregational meeting the present petitioners might yet loudly complain that their tender concerns were not sufficiently regarded. — On these accounts the paper was considered as under an extrajudicial conversation; — towards the close of which discussion took place respecting the principle of reading two lines together, of the Psalm in the time of singing, and all agreed that in itself it was a matter of indifference. Mr John Aitken remarked this, as well as all the rest.

It was ultimately agreed that the following paper should be read in the congregation on the insuing sabbath as the advice of Session, & the result of their deliberations. — That as a paper was handed to Session, subscribed by many members of the congregation complaining of several things which respected a decision in a late meeting of the congregation, or which sprung from it, which paper has been admitted to a serious deliberation in an extrajudicial conversation among the members — the result is, that as the late congregational meeting has given occasion to the complaints contained in the paper — that, at the request, made to the trustees, of any one of the subscribers, a congregational meeting shall be called to redress the grievence. It was also requested, particularly by Mr Young that it should be intimated to the congregation, that the Moderator insisted that from its nature the paper could not be properly acted upon in a sessional capacity —

The Session being again considered in an organised state it was constituted with prayer by the Moderator

Robt Bruce Clk p.t. [pro tempore]

Session met members present John Keting, Jas. Glover, Wm. Woods, Wm Bell[13] & John Roseburgh.

Appointed a day for the fast previous to the dispensation of the Sac. Appointed Mr Keting a committee to speak to Mr. Norris[14] who was reported to have been intoxicated & to inform him that till some evidence of refraining from spiritous liquers was given he could not be admitted to privileges.

Appointed the Moderator to write to the Rev. Mr. Wm. Wilson[15] not to serve any member of Pittsburgh congregation at his ensuing sacrament; as on that day the Sac. was to be dispensed in Pittsburgh. Appointed the Moderator to draw up an answer to the advice of Presbytery respecting returning to read one line, of the Psalms at a time, & singing no tunes except those that had been formerly used in the congregation.

Closed with prayer
June 17th, 1818

R B Clk

Augt 23, 1818

Session met members present Jas. Glover, John Keting, Wm. Woods, Wm. Bell, & John Roseburgh. The Mod. observed that Mr. Wm. Aitkens had applied to him for a certificate for himself and family; and that on the Modr. asking him respecting his designs he had told him that he did not know whether he would leave the Secession[16] or not. — The session agree, that it is not proper to grant the request of Wm Aitken respecting a certificate for himself and family for the following reasons, first — Mr Aitkens and family reside within the bounds of this congr. and if he and family remain in the secession they ought to be members of this congr. Secondly If Mr Aitkens and family intend to leave the Ass. Church the order of ecclesiastical discipline requires that they first give in their declinature to the principles of the

13 Merchant.
14 George Norris, carter, a repeated offender.
15 Minister of Montour's Run Associate Church.
16 The Associate Presbyterian Church.

secession together with the reasons for such a procedure. Thirdly, in respect to Mr Aitkens and his son Wm. they are at present precluded from receiving a certificate by their names being retained on the records of the presbytery of Chartiers as informal libellers of the Mod. of the Session of Pittsburgh.

Done by order of Session

Robt Bruce Clk p.t.