

## Presbyterians in Times of Controversy: A Word from the Editors

by James H. Moorhead & Frederick J. Heuser

IN THE 1960 MUSICAL "CAMELOT," BY Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe, King Arthur enjoins:

Each evening from December to December  
Before you drift to sleep upon your cot,  
Think back on all the tales that you remember  
Of Camelot.

Ask ev'ry person if he's heard the story;  
And tell it strong and clear if he has not:  
That once there was a fleeting wisp of glory  
Called Camelot.

Presbyterians may sometimes be tempted to (mis)remember the past in this fashion. In the midst of declining membership rolls and contemporary divisions, it is perhaps comforting to recall a better time when controversies did not exist or were of minor nature. Yet as the essays in the following pages demonstrate, memories of "a fleeting wisp of glory" may be as mythical as the Camelot of Arthurian legend. At virtually every stage of American history, Presbyterians have been no strangers to serious controversy.

This issue of *The Journal* does not claim to provide a comprehensive treatment of all the disputes in which American Presbyterians have engaged. Due to the limits of space and due to the fact that some prospective authors declined our invitations to write essays, the editors have not been able to include certain topics we had originally planned to address. Nevertheless, the ar-

ticles in this special issue do provide an overview of major controversies in American Presbyterian history from the colonial era to the late twentieth century. Revisiting terrain covered in her book *Triumph of the Laity*, Marilyn Westerkamp looks at the problems that tore Presbyterianism in two at the time of the Great Awakening in the 1740s. James H. Moorhead examines a similar schism between Old and New School Presbyterians in the 1830s. Bradley J. Longfield, in a reprise of matters treated in his study *The Presbyterian Controversy*, traces the emergence of fundamentalism and liberalism in the late nineteenth century and follows the ensuing battle until its culmination in the 1920s and 1930s. Rick Nutt shows how the seemingly placid 1950s prompted quarrels over the vigorous anticommunism of Senator Joseph McCarthy. From the perspective of Mississippi, R. Milton Winter describes the tensions within Southern Presbyterianism during an era of civil rights, theological reassessment, and a conservative secession to form a separate Presbyterian Church in America. Karla A. Koll argues that a long-term transformation of understandings of mission provided a crucial context for Presbyterian debates over United States policy in Central America during the 1980s.

What can Presbyterians learn from these controversies? In the concluding essay of

this issue, Frederick J. Heuser observes:

Shocking as it may sound, I do not believe that history automatically teaches us anything. The lessons of history are not quite as tangible as the Ten Commandments or the Sermon on the Mount, even though we might like them to be. The most important lessons that we learn from our past are the ones we consciously choose to learn, shaped

by a willingness to develop and use a historical perspective to understand the present. The lessons of history are not learned passively.

The editors offer this special issue to the church and to the scholarly community in the hope that it will indeed promote an active, not a passive, learning from the past.