

Session to Session

... promoting the strengthening and
growth of Biblical Presbyterianism
in America ...

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Biblical Presbyterianism and The Faith Once Delivered

by O. Palmer Robertson

[Note: This article is excerpted from an address given at the First General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America. As the PCA's fifteenth anniversary approaches, it may be well to consider afresh the commitments that accompanied the PCA's origin. — KAM]

"Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints."

— Jude 3 (NASV)

It is a Milquetoast Christianity which substitutes "faith" for "the faith," "believing" for "belief." Modern existentialist theology emphasizes *that* a person believe while minimizing *what* a person believe. *That* a man believes has significance; *what* a man believes must change with the times.

Biblical Presbyterianism does not commit itself to a meaningless believism or a man-centered subjectivism when it binds itself to "the faith." Its commitment is to that solid substance of faith found in Holy Scripture. Neither is the commitment of Biblical Presbyterianism to just any faith, to one expression of trust toward a deity among many valid options. Commitment must be to the one and only body of eternal truths which is the power of God unto salvation to all who believe.

It is to the faith found in Scripture that Biblical Presbyterianism commits itself. With the *Westminster Confession of Faith* as the basis for fellowship and ministry, Biblical Presbyterianism takes its stand unequivocally for the faith once delivered to the saints.

The above text from Jude suggests an athletic contest. It

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speaks of the "agony" involved in contending for a prize. God's kingdom and God's glory are at stake. Ungodly persons are turning the liberating freedom of God's gift of salvation into the debauchery of the new morality. Men—would you believe their audacity—are making mockery of the Lordship of God's Son Jesus. Agonize for the faith! Your task is to speak out when men speak untruth, or leave the truth unspoken.

But who should receive such a trust? Who is worthy of such things? To whom does God deliver "the faith?" Jude is quite explicit. It is "the faith which has been delivered to the saints." In this respect, Biblical Presbyterianism makes a firm commitment. Only the holy ones of God shall be judged worthy possessors of the treasure of the gospel. Biblical Presbyterianism commits itself to the task of contending earnestly for the purity of the Church.

Too long the Church has allowed aberrations from the faith in the name of charity. When true love would have admonished and disciplined a brother, the folly of man's wisdom has prevailed. The result has been the inclusion into the ordained status of the Church individuals who openly have refused to repent of their denial of essential doctrines of the Christian faith.

Out of love and concern for the health of Christ's body, Biblical Presbyterianism is committed to maintaining the purity of the church. This great faith, the trust of God

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Retelling an Old, Old Story

by John R. Muether

James A. Patterson, in "Robert E. Speer, J. Gresham Machen and the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions" (*American Presbyterians*, Spring 1986, pp. 58-68), retells the tale of the crisis in American Presbyterian missions in the 1920s and '30s. Patterson focuses on the debate between Machen and Robert Speer, a committed evangelical who, as secretary of the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions, was the object of Machen's criticism that modernism had infiltrated the Board. Patterson sees the issue in nontheological terms: "... the gap between Machen and Speer was one of attitude and style rather than theology. ... Speer's warm evangelicalism clashed with the scholastic precisionism of Machen. ..." The adjectives in the previous sentence make plain where

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himself, shall be delivered to the saints, and to the saints alone.

Into your hands almighty God has placed the trust of the gospel. It has been delivered to you. What are you to do with that trust? Not only are you to contend earnestly for the faith. You are to declare the faith. You are to communicate the faith to others.

The commitment of Biblical Presbyterianism is not only to the faith; not only to the faith which has been delivered; but to the faith which has been once delivered. How great it is to turn to the impregnable rock of Holy Scripture and to find certainty in its finalized form. God has completed the long historical process of his revelation to men. In the inscripturated Word of God may be found the truth—unchanging, life-giving, understandable truth.

Biblical Presbyterianism is fully aware that everyone does not hold to the finality of the revelation found in Scripture. It knows full well of those who piously boast of a “living Christ” who continues to reveal himself in the assemblies of the Church.

Far from denying the reality of the living Christ who rose in the body on the third day, Biblical Presbyterianism makes concrete its commitment to this Christ by submitting to his finalized revelation as it is found in Scripture. We affirm without equivocation that to Scripture “nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men” (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, I, 6). The faith has been “once” delivered. It stands complete. It lacks nothing.

On the current scene, additions to the once-for-all revelation of Scripture are being proposed by ecclesiastical hierarchists as well as modern enthusiasts. These people propose to add to the revelation of God found in Scripture. They presume to suggest that the pronouncements of church courts or new words from the Spirit may serve alongside Scripture as the Word of God. They suggest that the temporal limitations of Scripture may be superceded by their contemporary additions to God’s revelation.

While the Church clearly has the task of promoting the submission of God’s people to Scripture, it never may assume to itself the responsibility of supplementing Scripture. Scripture is the completed revelation of God to his people, which needs no supplementary additions, and which is the “only infallible rule of faith and practice.”

Biblical Presbyterianism rejoices in the wholeness it finds in “the faith once delivered to the saints.” Our unity in the faith reflects our privileged position of being one with Christ as a part of his body. Knowing his body to be one, we rejoice in the oneness we now experience with all who are committed to the same precious faith. May the Lord of his Church be pleased to hasten the perfecting of that unity with himself and among us, “until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fulness of Christ.” (Eph. 4:13).

The Heritage Remembered

For the Honor of the Church, For the Glory of God

by Kenneth A. Myers

James Henley Thornwell (1812-1861) is a figure in the history of American Presbyterianism who, when not ignored, is often misunderstood. Thornwell was a prominent player in the formation in 1861 of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America, the “Southern Presbyterian Church” (later the PCUS).

Southern churchmen during the 1860s are often characterized as entertaining an unhealthy and unholy alliance between their respective commitments to Church and state. It is often assumed that the Southern Presbyterian Church was formed primarily for political reasons. Having those assumptions myself, it was interesting to go back and read Thornwell’s address of December 4, 1861, at the founding General Assembly of the PCCSA.

In May of that year, the General Assembly of the still-united Presbyterian Church had met and addressed the issue of the ten Southern states that had seceded from the Union. After long debate, the Assembly passed (156-66) a resolution which condemned the secession, and declared that Christian people in general and Presbyterians in particular, “in the spirit of that Christian patriotism which the Scriptures enjoin,” had an obligation “to promote and perpetuate, so far as in us lies, the integrity of these United States, and to strengthen, uphold, and encourage, the Federal Government in the exercise of all its functions under our noble Constitution.” The resolution was vigorously protested by (among others), the venerable Dr. Charles Hodge of Princeton, who said that the General Assembly had no right to decide “to what government the allegiance of Presbyterians is due.”

At stake was not a matter of Biblical interpretation, but of constitutional interpretation. All parties agreed, on the basis of Romans 13, on the question of “Christian patriotism.” At issue was the question of whether it was unconstitutional (and hence unpatriotic) to secede.

Agreeing in principle with Hodge, Thornwell and other Southerners insisted that the question of constitutional interpretation was not within the scope of the authority of the Church. As Thornwell eloquently put it:

A political theory was, to all intents and purposes, propounded [by the General Assembly], which made secession a crime, the seceding States rebellious, and the citizens who obeyed them traitors. We say nothing here as to the righteousness or unrighteousness of these decrees. What we maintain is, that, whether right or wrong, the Church had no right to make them—she transcended her sphere, and usurped the duties of the State. The discussion of these questions, we are sorry

to add, was in the spirit and temper of partizan declaimers. The Assembly, driven from its ancient moorings, was tossed to and fro by the waves of popular passion. Like Pilate, it obeyed the clamor of the multitude and though acting in the name of Jesus, it kissed the sceptre and bowed the knee to the mandates of Northern phrenzy. . . . For the sake of peace, therefore, for Christian charity, for the honor of the Church, and for the glory of God, we have been constrained, as much as in us lies, to remove all occasion of offence. We have quietly separated, and we are grateful to God that, while leaving for the sake of peace, we leave it with the humble consciousness that we, ourselves, have never given occasion to break the peace. We have never confounded Caesar and Christ, and we have never mixed the issues of this world with the weighty matters that properly belong to us as citizens of the Kingdom of God.

Thornwell's refusal to harness the Church to a political agenda would likely be as misunderstood today as it was in 1861. In the heat of political passion, the distinction between Christ and Caesar is often ignored, no less by those who oppose the status quo than by those who uphold it. In a day when ecclesiastical bodies speak, for example, of the necessity of disinvestment in South Africa in the name of the Kingdom of God, one realizes how timeless Thornwell's stand really was.

Thornwell and Calhoun: Churchman and Statesman

By William Brailsford

When R. C. Stanton labeled the great Southern Presbyterian churchman James Henley Thornwell as "the Calhoun of the Church" more than a century ago, to many, especially in the South, no higher compliment could have been given. James Oscar Farmer's characterization of Thornwell as "the Calhoun of the Church" in his recent book *The Metaphysical Confederacy James Henley Thornwell and the Synthesis of Southern Values* (Mercer University Press, 1986) comes across as a fully-barbed compliment at best.

Farmer's comparison of John C. Calhoun and Thornwell provides insight into the author's assessment of his subject. Both men were important figures in the 19th century. The two native South Carolinians rose to national prominence because of their keen intellect, explosive oratory and passionate devotion to a cause or confession. Both men, too, had to choose eventually between the Union, which they dearly loved, and the South, which they loved even more. The decision lost Calhoun the vice-

Cornelius Van Til Sleeps: A Tribute to His Living

Loved like Lazarus
like Lazarus he sleeps.
The women his sisters
weep.

"He does well
if he sleeps"
unknowing for the moment
his brothers say.

Forgetful of the agonies,
the loneliness and the pain
of a weary warrior's way.

"Your brother is dead"
says Jesus,
His stark pronouncement
sobering.

"But for your sakes
I am glad"
(and for his).

"Your brother shall
live again.
Do you believe this?"

"At the last day . . ."
they say
". . . Yes!"

But know you not
Of the souls beheaded?
Resurrected?
The first to be raised?
To reign
A thousand years "already"?

Priests, holy, blessed
Martyrs for the testimony
Of Jesus and the Word.

They worshipped not
the beast
Their foreheads clear
of the muddling mark.

And the "not yet" . . .
It shall come soon enough!
With the now
strengthened cry
of the "How long"
How could it be
now long?

Not only because of Jesus
but because of him
many believed
and do believe.

Jesus deeply moved,
weeping,
commands,
"Come forth."

And so he did.
Ever listening to his
master's voice,
he's loosed to serve.

With Greeks soon coming
"The hour has come."
Philosophy forgot
they Jesus seek.

His hourglass drained,
more quickly overturned.
Time and life begin
again.

But this new Time
is for Eternity.

— OPR

presidency. It lost Thornwell his denomination, half his colleagues and, some would say, his life.

Yet from Farmer, the reader is left with the impression that a man like Thornwell had little business being an ecclesiastical statesman. For all the thoughtful, detailed

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analysis of Thornwell and the South that Farmer provides in his book, he seems to dismiss summarily the passion that would cause a man like Thornwell to give up national regard in favor of his native state. Soon the polished image of Calhoun's likeness becomes dull, as explosive oratory is translated into fire-eating sectionalism, and passionate devotion to a cause becomes misguided rhetoric. Farmer blames Thornwell and other religious leaders of the day (especially Presbyterians) as contributing to a synthesized moral value system "which undergirded the will of the Southern people and thereby provided the confidence which projected the South towards secession and war."

He compares the Fast-Day sermons preached in Southern pulpits prior to the Civil War to the famous Puritan jeremiads preached in New England a century and a half earlier. This rhetoric, he concludes, somewhat comparable to Thomas Paine's Common Sense, forced pious Southerners and Southern ministers into a sectional conflict. Spiritual oratory becomes political canon, in Farmer's view.

The Metaphysical Confederacy will be of great interest, especially since many in the Church are realizing again how important are our 19th century roots. Farmer's work provides us with well formed intellectual history and social biography, and despite its limitations, deserves a fair reading.

William Brailsford is a graduate of Westminster Theological Seminary, and works for Harper & Row.

The excerpt from Thornwell's General Assembly address on pages 2 & 3 was taken from *The Presbyterian Enterprise: Sources of American Presbyterian History*, edited by Maurice W. Armstrong, et al. (Westminster Press, 1956).

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Patterson's sympathies lie. This bias forces him into a revisionist approach to the Presbyterian heritage: while Machen was "a 'strict' subscriptionist who overemphasized the doctrinal dimensions of the Christian faith," Speer "claimed that his policy of openness and forbearance represented the best traditions of Presbyterianism." Patterson's preference for Speer's "broad and pragmatic" evangelicalism over the "precisionism" of Machen's stalwart Calvinism prompts one to wonder how he would characterize present debates within Presbyterianism, and where he thinks Machen might ally himself.

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