

Session to Session

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On the Character of Church Power: A Protest

by Edmund P. Clowney

The undersigned commissioners to the Fifteenth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America respectfully protest the action of the Assembly in adopting recommendations 4-12 of the report of the Ad Interim Committee to Study and Make Recommendations as to Structure and Procedure as presented by a majority of that committee. This action of the Assembly approves and sends to the Presbyteries for action the proposed amendments to the *Book of Church Order*. . . .

We protest this action because we believe the proposed amendments restructure the polity of the Presbyterian Church in America so as to impair the expression of the unity of Christ's church in its government. We further protest a confusion in these amendments on the crucial issue of the right of the church to appeal to the protection of the civil power.

We wish to support this second allegation first. In the amendments regarding the powers of Presbytery and of General Assembly, the amendments declare that "the powers of the Presbytery (General Assembly) are only spiritual, declarative and ministerial. The Presbytery (General Assembly) may not call on civil power to enforce ecclesiastical actions against a (Presbytery) Session, local congregation or any member thereof." In both sections it is then added that this does not preclude the court from exercising the right to control its own membership by use of civil power.

It is clear that three distinct questions are here confused: (1) the right of the church to appeal to the civil power; (2) the purpose of the church in appealing to the civil power; and (3) those against whom civil action may be taken.

If a church court has the right to appeal to the civil power against its own membership, then it cannot be true

Editor's note: This Protest is contained in the minutes of the Fifteenth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America. One hundred forty-six elders joined in this Protest.

that the spiritual nature of its authority bars it from seeking the intervention of civil power under some circumstances.

Further, it is one thing to call on civil power to enforce ecclesiastical actions, another to call upon the civil power for the protection of such rights as are common to any organization. It is already clearly affirmed in our Constitution that the church cannot seek civil sanctions to enforce its discipline (BCO 3-2; 3-4). This is equally forbidden whether the discipline be directed toward the membership of a court or to others over whom the court may have jurisdiction. Does the spiritual character of church power and the consequent ban on any appeal to civil sanctions determine the scope of administrative or judicial jurisdiction? The answer is, "No". The amendment, however, suggests that this is the case. We protest this confusion, for we believe that it is misleading. It wrongly implies that the scope of a court's jurisdiction must be limited in order to preserve the spiritual character of its rule.

We also protest the restructuring of our present Presbyterian government sought in the proposed amendments. It is true that Exhibit G propounds the thesis that the PCA is a connectional church in ecclesiastical matters but is not a connectional church in regard to civil matters. Yet the changes proposed in the BCO show that the majority re-

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Kingdoms in Conflict: Charles Colson Tackles the Question of Church and State

by Kenneth A. Myers

As the PCA continues to debate various questions involving the relationship between the Church and the civil magistrate, Charles Colson has just written what may prove to be a very influential book on the topic. Published jointly by Zondervan and William Morrow, *Kingdoms in Conflict* is a wide-ranging study that combines history, theology, and old-fashioned story-telling.

The big story Colson is telling concerns man's constant effort to supplant God's rule with the rule of man, in one

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port of the committee has not found a way to maintain the authority of a broader Assembly in the spiritual polity of the church while excluding its right to seek of the state the protection to which it is entitled.

The right of the presbytery to "visit churches for the purpose of inquiring into and redressing evils that may have arisen" is reduced to the right to "request the privilege of visiting" churches.

From the powers of the General Assembly there is omitted (1) "to take care that the lower courts observe the Constitution; to redress whatever they may have done contrary to order"; (2) "to suppress schismatical contentions and disputations, according to the rules provided therefor"; (3) "to superintend the affairs of the whole church". (This last becomes, "to recommend measures for the promotion of charity, truth and holiness through all the churches under its care".)

These limitations are summarized by the formulation that the higher courts may act on an issue, act against the lower court by dismissing it, but may not act for a lower court. This formulation takes up again a proposed amendment to BCO 11-4 approved in the 1984 General Assembly but rejected by the Presbyteries 34-3.

Our present *BCO* in its *Form of Church Government* and *Rules for Discipline* contains ample safeguards to protect the original jurisdiction of Presbyteries and Sessions. The right of every congregation to keep title to its own property is also emphatically stated. We would not protest the proposing of particular changes in our *BCO* to clarify the prerogatives of particular courts so as to limit misuse of power. We recognize the revulsion of our brethren against the abuse of power that has been characteristic of certain large Presbyterian denominations.

Yet we respectfully protest changes that so decidedly limit the functioning of Presbyterian government. That government is not democratic nor aristocratic, nor is it a compromise between the two. Rather, it confesses that Jesus Christ is the only King and Head of the Church, and that he has established it as the new people of God in the world. The form of Presbyterian church government uniquely reflects the remarkable fact that the definitive Assembly of the Church is in heaven (Hebrews 12:23,24), and that the Church may therefore be gathered on earth in larger or smaller assemblies: in house churches or in city churches (I Corinthians 16:19, Colossians 4:15,16) or in gatherings of church elders concerned with the affairs of the church at large (Acts 15). A meeting of the teaching elders at Antioch manifests the life of the church there (Acts 13:1-3). The apostolic unity of the church appears in Paul's ordaining for all the churches his instructions for worship (I Corinthians 7:17) as well as in the decree of the Jerusalem council. Presbyterians have seen the house-church as a local congregation, an assembly included within the larger city-church. The presbytery is the council formed by the elders of the city church. This flexibility

grounded in unity undergirds the statement of *BCO* 11-4: "These courts are not separate and independent tribunals, but they have a mutual relation, and every act of jurisdiction is the act of the whole church performed by it though the appropriate organ."

Our protest expresses our concern that the proposed amendments reduce or remove the effective functioning of the church in its broader assemblies by removing their right to visit and correct the judiciaries under their jurisdiction.

Edmund P. Clowney is a Teaching Elder at Trinity Presbyterian Church, Charlottesville, Virginia. Previously, he served for thirty years as professor and then president of Westminster Theological Seminary.

Hold to the Heritage

By O. Palmer Robertson

Christian coach John Wooden of basketball fame had a saying that carried him through many tight moments: "Plan your work and work your plan." Don't panic in the pinch. Stay steady at the helm.

That's a down-to-earth way of saying, "Hold to the heritage." If you've got something good going, don't give it up! Don't let modern-day pressures pull you down.

Pictures of a supple iron-pumper may be an okay way to promote evangelism among the yuppies—so long as the OPC keeps affirming it has no intention of disguising its commitment to the "whole counsel of God."

A standing ovation at Synod for a young girl pleading for her ordination text in the CRC sends mixed signals about "holding to the heritage," as does a motion introduced at the ARP assembly that their church should give a cordial welcome to the pope. As one delegate appropriately quipped, "Shall we say, 'Welcome, Antichrist!'?"

The PCA faces a more grinding, wearing struggle through the year to come. Shall we "hold to the heritage," or shall we not? This decision the PCA presbyteries will make by voting for or against a large block of proposed changes to the *Book of Church Order*.

The case was strongly made at the PCA assembly for a division between civic powers and ecclesiastical powers in the courts of the church. The proposal that passed wants to change our church's structures rather radically. In essence, the change would say, "Let us remain partly presbyterian, and let us now also become significantly nonpresbyterian."

The good intentions behind this block of changes in the *PCA Book of Church Order* coincide with the good character of the men promoting them. More about that later.

But only slightly below the surface is the reality of

large changes in the spiritual ordering of the church's life. The hidden significance of these changes is what led one hundred forty-six delegates to join Edmund P. Clowney in a protest. Speaking personally, this is the first time in fifteen years since the inception of the PCA that I have felt compelled to join in an exercise that generally leaves a bad taste in everybody's mouth.

Speaking of everybody, we all know that congregationalism leads to unitarianism (don't we?). No finer group of theologians committed to the Bible could have been assembled than those that dominated early New England history. But their isolationistic congregational form of church government speeded their downfall and confirmed the biblical proverb: "Two are better than one. . . . If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!" (Eccl. 4:9,10) Without a friend, the fallen stays down. And in true domino fashion, he takes another with him. And another . . . and another . . .

Yes, presbyterianism has its risks. The very word "connectionalism" creates some bad vibes. Most of us have been burned by ecclesiastical connections.

But is presbyterianism biblical? That's the question. If a properly conceived presbyterianism that connects the local church with the larger church is biblical, then by all means run the risk and work together as churches committed to one another.

"But didn't they try to take our property?" you fondly ask. As a matter of fact, it was a lack of participation in true connectionalism that most often led to the loss of property in the old church. When congregations and presbyteries held together in promoting the heritage of our biblical traditions of doctrine and government, churches were much more likely to keep their properties intact. Wherever congregations withdrew within themselves, they eventually lost it all.

The quickest way to lose property for the Lord's church is to isolate oneself from the brothers in the larger body. For then a small group can work its way into positions of power in the local congregation, and no way of relief will be available from the brothers abroad.

Unquestionably the motives behind the proposed changes in the PCA *Book of Church Order* are good. The desire to protect the local church from outside, unwanted, oppressive interference by presbytery and general assembly is right. This kind of protection we all want.

But the full effect of these changes to our presbyterian heritage must be understood. By one omnibus decision, the PCA will have relinquished its ability to provide effective help in deference to the controlling group in every local congregation forever in the future. No matter how heretical may be their views, no matter how heavy-handed may be their control, the PCA will have decided not to provide effective relief. Counsel, yes. But relief, no. These changes to our presbyterian heritage in the PCA

would not be felt first in the property question. They would have their largest effect in weakening the way for maintaining spiritual health among the fellowship. Dr. Clowney's "Protest" plainly makes the point. No longer could the General Assembly "take care that the lower courts observe the constitution" and "redress whatever they may have done contrary to order" (present BCO 14-6). Instead, only the power of suggestion, counsel and cutting off the brothers would be allowed to the higher courts.

Holding to our heritage does not mean supporting all kinds of oppressive powers from the courts of the church. It only says that we need to unite our strengths in supporting the Scriptures, the Westminster Standards, and a biblical church government. That's what upholding our church's "constitution" means.

Let us run the risk of being biblical. Let us "hold to the heritage" that has made us great by God's grace. Having "planned our work" as presbyterians, let us "work our plan" as presbyterians.

Colson on Church and State, cont. from page 1

form or another. While the kingdoms of man are not necessarily in conflict with God's Kingdom, because of man's sin, they almost inevitably attempt to usurp the allegiance owed only to God. This, Colson argues, is the root of the illusory myth that virtually all social ills can be solved by political means.

But Colson is no anarchist. His view of the state is very Augustinian and Reformed, not Anabaptist. Colson draws heavily from work on Church, state, and Kingdom by Calvin, Herman Ridderbos, Gerhardus Vos, J. Marcellus Kik, and Edmund Clowney. Colson sees a significant if limited role for the state, a role that complements the role of the family and of the Church.

But that role is impeded in our own time by the atheism of the Soviet bloc and the materialism and secularism of the West. Many of the stories in the book concern the effects of those forces of modern times.

Colson steers a careful path between saying that religion and politics don't have anything to do with one another, and the opposite mistake of believing that the political order can bring in the Kingdom of God. Central to Colson's understanding of the state is an emphasis on the rule of law, an important bastion against relativism.

Colson is especially concerned that the Church will play politics like any other group in the U.S. "The church is not and must never allow itself to become just another special-interest group lined up at the public trough. For in doing so, as one contemporary scholar observes, it would 'sacrifice its claim to objective ethical concern which [is the church's] chief political as well as moral resource'."

In a time when politics is becoming more and more

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compelling to conservative Protestants, Colson's most important contribution may be his insistence on the true priorities of the Church. In a chapter offering advice to Christians who enter into political life, Colson reminds us: "Politics is not the church's first calling. Evangelism, administering the sacraments, providing discipleship, fellowship, teaching the Word, and exhorting its members to holy living are the heartbeat of the church."

Earlier in the book, Colson balances this warning with a

call to involvement. "While the church must avoid utopianism and diversion from its transcendent mission, it is not to ignore the political scene. To the contrary . . . its members, who are also citizens of the world, have a duty, as Carl Henry puts it, 'to work through civil authority for the advancement of justice and human good.' They may provide 'critical illumination, personal example and vocational leadership'." Colson's book is filled with many such examples, culled from his global travels since his conversion and his own experiences in politics prior to it. While few readers will agree with Colson on all points, *Kingdoms in Conflict*, like Colson's previous books, is bound to be a best-seller.

[In the interest of journalistic propriety, I should acknowledge my work with Chuck Colson on the early stages of Kingdoms in Conflict. —KAM]

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