

Session to Session

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

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A Handbook for Ruling Elder Involvement in the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America

by O. Palmer Robertson

"He who rules, let him do it with diligence." Romans 12:8

The ruling elder gave birth to the Presbyterian Church in America. Not the preachers but the ruling elders. When the ministers were too cautious to take decisive action, the ruling elders took the lead. They formed the organizations and called the meetings that eventually led to the formation of the PCA.

Now the ruling elder must devote himself to diligence in maintaining this great church. If the PCA is to realize fully its unique opportunities in the needy world today, ruling elders must show their commitment and concern by consistent involvement at every level of the church's life. Particularly at the General Assembly, the ruling elder must be present, and he must be heard. He who rules must do so with diligence. The only thing necessary for evil to prevail is for good men to do nothing.

When the ruling elder cares enough to get involved, he will keep the church aware of the real world and the desperate need it has for the good news about Jesus Christ. At the same time, he will exercise a restraint on tendencies to depart from the faith.

This handbook is designed to encourage the ruling elder to stay involved in the Lord's church. It is hoped that the trend toward a smaller and smaller percentage of ruling elder participation at the General Assembly will be reversed. The well-being of the church depends on it.

Take the following steps to get involved in the General Assembly of the church:

1. Begin by praying for your church. Thank God for its commitment to the Scriptures, the great commission, and a mature Biblical faith. Ask the Lord to continue to bless it with peace, purity and zeal for serving Him by reaching out to the world.

2. Make a commitment to be personally involved as a ruling elder in the General Assembly. Four times it is stated that the "apostles and elders" made the decisions of the first Assembly in Jerusalem (Acts 15:2,4,6,22). Elders must continue to exercise this responsibility. It will cost you time,

money—even vacation. It will require a reshuffling of your priorities. But the cause is worth the commitment.

3. Talk about this matter in your Session. Raise the subject. Commitment to be involved must be a joint decision.

4. Plan who should be your Session's representative early in the year. In a larger church, consider relieving this elder of other responsibilities so he can devote himself to the preparation necessary for this important task. Because ruling elder involvement in the General Assembly is serious business, give it your best.

5. Encourage your representative from Session to attend at least two years in succession. To really become comfortable with the procedures of the Assembly, a person needs to go more than once. If your church is entitled to send more than one delegate, stagger your representatives so that at least one will have had the experience gained from attending the previous year.

6. Once you have been selected as a delegate, keep current with the registration procedures so you will be included in all the mailings.

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G. I. Williamson on the Restoration of the Biblical Eldership

by Stanley D. Gale

Is it any wonder that the state of the Church is so low and the people are so weak and unfaithful?," remarks G. I. Williamson in a recent address. What is it that prompts such a scathing assessment from such a notable statesman of the reformed faith?

Take stock of the state of the church. Why is it that the people of God have such a low esteem for the one day of the week the Lord has set aside for Himself and for the benefit of His people? When they do come to God's house and sit under the preaching of the word, do they understand what has been promulgated? Do they apply to their lives what they have heard and understood?

Our inability to answer these questions is exactly the point to be made. Dr. Williamson cites Gregory Reynolds in saying: "If we are really going to see a mighty resurgence of Biblical Christianity [which to me is the reformed faith] in this country, we are going to have to have a restoration of a really effective and diligent biblical eldership." To what

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7. Make yourself available to your presbytery to serve on a "Committee of Commissioners." These committees generally meet at the site of the Assembly during the weekend prior to the formal opening of the Assembly. They are critical in their importance, since they set the agenda and formulate the motions to be presented to the Assembly.

8. Choose the "Committee of Commissioners" that looks most interesting to you. The principal duties of the various "Committees of Commissioners" are as follows: (1) *Administration*—considers matters affecting the policies and procedures of the General Assembly and the church at large; (2) *Bills and Overtures*—reviews proposals of all sorts coming from sessions, presbyteries, and individuals; (3) *Christian Education*—reviews the work and recommendations of the permanent committee; (4) *Covenant College*—reviews the work of the Board and Administration of the Assembly's college; (5) *Covenant Seminary*—review the work of the Assembly's seminary as it prepares men for the ministry; (6) *Insurance Annuities and Relief*—cares for the well-being of ministers and employees in the church; (7) *Interchurch Relations*—considers the relation of the PCA to other churches; (8) *Judicial Business*—recommends viewpoints on theology and the government of the church where questions or disputes arise; (9) *Mission to North America*—analyzes our continent; (10) *Mission to the World*—reviews the efforts we are making to reach the world for Christ, including an analysis of principles, practices and strategies; (11) *PCA foundation*—considers the investment program of the church; (12) *Review and Control*—examines and evaluates the records and actions of presbyteries; (13) *Ridge Haven*—oversees the work of the church's conference center.

9. Be aware of the importance of these "Committees of Commissioners," and understand how they work. These committees are made up of commissioners to the Assembly chosen by the various presbyteries. They have the responsibility of reviewing the work of the permanent committees of the Assembly. They have a major role to play in seeing that the church does not become too centralized. They also provide a framework of accountability for the coordinators of the various General Assembly permanent committees.

In order to fulfill their responsibility properly, the "Committees of Commissioners" must maintain their own independence and integrity. While the staff and the members of the permanent committees can be helpful as resources, it is the responsibility of the "Committees of Commissioners" to reach their own decisions and formulate their own recommendations to the Assembly.

10. In reviewing the work of the permanent committees, it should be remembered that the permanent committees are not to establish policy, but to carry out policy already determined by the General Assembly [BCO 14-1(7)]. The permanent committees are to function as servants carrying our decisions made by the church, not to formulate policies for the church. Nothing less than the maintenance of the Biblical form of church government hinges on retaining this im-

portant distinction.

11. Find out in advance the main issues that will come up in your committee and in the Assembly as a whole. Notice the matters that arise in presbytery. Ask other ruling and teaching elders for their understanding of the matters. Read the various journals and newsletters that are available. A handbook of Assembly business will be mailed to you before the meeting. Although it will look large, you can pick out the major issues. Also, the minutes of the permanent committee that corresponds to your "Committee of Commissioners" should be mailed to you.

12. If you are not chosen by your presbytery to serve on a "Committee of Commissioners," you still should go to the pre-Assembly committee meeting if possible. As an observer, you can sit in on any of the committees and enter into the discussion until the committee goes into executive session for its formal voting. Attend the meetings of more than one committee if you like.

13. From all the various issues that are to come before the Assembly, pick one or two that seem most important to you. Prepare yourself to speak on those issues. It is most important that ruling elders *speak out* on matters that concern them.

14. When you speak, be brief and to the point. Respond to the various views that have been expressed, or add your own insight.

15. Sit in on every session of the General Assembly. Plan your schedule so that you can stay until the end. Vote on every issue as your means of discharging your responsibility to the Lord.

16. Take back a full report to your Session. Give them a sense of the tenor and the actions of the Assembly.

17. Watch for the matters that have arisen in the General Assembly as they return to the presbytery. At that time, provide the information you have gotten from attending the Assembly.

18. Continue to pray that the Lord will bless our church with increasing commitment to Him, and will enable us to offer more effective service to the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.



The task is great, though it often may seem mundane. But the Lord has promised that He will bless every effort done in His name. "Let us not be weary in well doing, for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not" (Galatians 6:9).

"It is not pretended that the Presbyterian form of Church government can, of itself, infuse spiritual life and activity into an ecclesiastical body; but that where vitality, and zeal, and resources exist, there is no form of ecclesiastical organization in the world so well adapted to unite counsels, and invigorate efforts, as that under which we are so happy as to live." —from Samuel Miller, *The Ruling Elder* (1832)

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does Dr. Williamson attribute culpability for the state of the contemporary church when he describes it as being “dead and ineffective and unbiblical?”—to the demise of an effective and diligent biblical eldership.

The Apostle Paul, Dr. Williamson notes, in Acts 20:17-36 is concerned to provide for Christ’s Church in the wake of his imminent departure. So he convenes a meeting, not a meeting of the congregation, but of the elders. It is the elders who are the key to the future well-being of the Church of Jesus Christ, elders who are to be shepherds (vs. 28) and protectors of Christ’s bride against the enemy of the Church (vss. 29f.).

Ah, but this is the job of the pastor, we might insist. Well, then, where are the pastors in Paul’s Acts 20 address? They are there, but not as ones separated out from the elders; rather, they are present as the elders they themselves are. “Pastors are elders and elders are pastors,” notes Dr. Williamson.

The Scriptures know of only two offices for the church, elder and deacon. To be sure, there is a distinction to be made in the office of elder between teaching elder and ruling elder (see 1 Tim. 5:17), but it is the office of elder to which is given by Christ’s command the responsibility of overseeing and shepherding his flock. The great apostle himself presents his own efforts of oversight and shepherding as exemplary for the elders (Acts 20:35; cf. 1 Pet. 5:1) that Christ’s Church might be preserved and strengthened.

Is this joint ministerial endeavor in respect to the flock under their care what we witness in the local churches of our land today? So often, it is the minister who is expected to do shepherding, while the elders join him in the administration of the church. Again, we press the question, “Is it any wonder that the state of the Church is so low and the people are so weak and unfaithful?” Should we be surprised to see anemia and decay when the invigorating direction and order of the Head of the Church is ignored?

Dr. Williamson calls out for care of the flock. Elders as undershepherds of Christ, the Chief Shepherd, must know and minister to those in their charge. Confronting sin, speaking the truth in love, calling to repentance, encouraging in the faith, comforting all who contribute to the job description of the one called to the office of elder, be it ruling or teaching. Elders must be elders, and elders are shepherds by the design of Christ.

We as elders can resuscitate Christ’s Church only by taking up the mantle of responsibility he has given us, confident that it is his way that he will bless. Not that we can expect a “quick fix,” Dr. Williamson warns. Quite the contrary. Success will be realized only with “hard work and diligence and many tears.”

The first step is to repent of our irresponsibility, our lack of love and our disobedience to the call to this office of elder, and bring forth fruit in keeping with our repentance that the Church of Jesus Christ we love may be revitalized by the power of the Holy Spirit and, most importantly, that our Lord may be pleased. Elders, teaching and ruling, “Keep

watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseer. Be shepherds of the Church of God, which he bought with his own blood” (Acts 20:28).

Stanley D. Gale is Assistant to the Pastor at Wallace Memorial Presbyterian Church.

Presbyterianism and Independent Minds

by John R. Muether

In his recent book, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Eerdmans), George Marsden offers an interesting interpretation of the directions in conservative Presbyterianism in the years following the fundamentalist-modernist debate of the '20s and '30s.

Marsden argues that in the early 1930s, Westminster Seminary promised to be the rallying point for conservatives and fundamentalists who valued the intellect. As Marsden notes, “Scholarship as well as piety, Machen and his followers were convinced, was absolutely necessary for establishing a solid foundation for long-term evangelical survival and resurgence. . . . Pious preaching without a firm scholarly base was, moreover, unbiblical, contradicting the New Testament pattern in which the leading evangelist was a classically educated intellectual.” But some of Machen’s staunchest supporters broke with him when he established the independent mission board. When the Presbyterian leadership tried and defrocked Machen and his allies, conservatives had to choose sides.

Conservative Presbyterians essentially fell into two camps. Machen and his separatist allies left the church, finding “the Presbyterian church hopelessly apostate.” (This camp can be further subdivided into strict confessionals and fundamentalist separatists, the latter splitting from the Orthodox Presbyterian Church following Machen’s death.)

Other conservatives eschewed denominational separatism. Some of them went on to establish parachurch or independent ministries. Others remained in the Presbyterian church, but became “functional congregationalists,” deliberately isolating themselves from denominational involvement. Some of these remained in the church precisely because they could be functionally congregationalist. Marsden cites the case of Wilbur Smith, “independence-minded as anyone, [who argued] for remaining in the Presbyterian ministry on the anomalous grounds that in it he was as free as ‘if I were the pastor of a church entirely independent of any ecclesiastical organization.’”

Marsden’s interpretive scheme may help shed light on present PCA concerns. These two streams of 20th century conservative Presbyterians generally charted separate paths.

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But in the formation and growth of the PCA, we may be seeing, for the first time, substantial reuniting of the two: strict confessionalists who seek the continuing Presbyterian church, and functional congregationalists who, like Smith, desire ministries and churches "independent of any ecclesiastical organization."

If this is so, it would lend support to those who believe that present debates within the PCA are best characterized as matters of ecclesiology. What really separates the "T.R.'s" and the "broad evangelicals," for example, is not

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so much how seriously one takes the five points of Calvinism, but rather how true to historic Presbyterianism one cares to be (and, more basically, how true to Scripture one believes historic Presbyterianism to be).

The level of one's commitment to historic Presbyterianism also affects one's methodology in approaching union between the OPC and the PCA. When weighing the relative merits of "contracted negotiation" or "joining and receiving" or "voluntary realignment," it is appropriate to be concerned not just with what will "work," but to ask which plan is the most Presbyterian means of joining Presbyterian churches. Or, to put it another way, can a Presbyterian church emerge from a congregationalist plan of union?

John R. Muether is librarian at Westminster Theological Seminary.

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