

Session to Session

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Morton Howison Smith: A Word of Appreciation

by O. Palmer Robertson

After seeing the Presbyterian Church in America through its first sixteen assemblies as Stated Clerk, Dr. Morton H. Smith is moving his energies to the area of his first love: the teaching of theology. A few remembrances may suffice as a brief word of appreciation.

Dr. Smith spent the early days of his ministry in the declining years of the Southern Presbyterian Church (PCUS). Already the heresy trials against a certain professor at a certain seminary had failed. The inevitable drift to liberalism had begun, and its momentum was gaining speed.

An effort had been made by those committed to the Scriptures to "take over" one of the four PCUS seminaries, and it had failed. Its president chose instead to make the faculty "representative" of the various views of the denomination. The results were tragic.

So the plan developed to find a college where young men preparing for the ministry could be steeped in the truths of the word of God. Then they could be thrown into the lion's den of the liberal seminaries.

A few men suggested Belhaven college, which had been an all-girl's school for 75 years. Of course a strong faculty would be needed to pioneer the way.

With a large vision, Dr. Smith began teaching courses in Bible and theology. The idea caught, and a steady stream of vigorous young men preparing for the ministry came to sit at his feet.

A few years later, the need for a seminary as well as a college became even more acute. Rev. Sam Patterson, president of a school run on faith for children from broken homes, had his eyes opened. The now-famous (or infamous) article in *The Presbyterian Outlook* bore the challenging title: "Do We Need An Infallible Bible?" Representatives of the four PCUS seminaries replied: We do not have nor do we need an infallible Bible.

Mr. Patterson presented to a group of laymen the need for a seminary holding to the Scriptures as the very word of God. They were willing to try a one-year experiment with one professor. So again, with a strong commitment of faith, Dr. Smith left Westminster Seminary to come to French Camp, Mississippi. There his training as a World War II pilot came in handy as he flew all about the South holding

classes, whetting a languishing church's appetite for the deep, rich things of the word of God.

Moving one year later to Jackson, Mississippi, he was the first and founding professor of Reformed Theological Seminary (RTS). Seventeen students enrolled the first year, doubling to thirty-four the second, until the school grew to become an internationally recognized institution.

Then came the Presbyterian Church in America. It wasn't easy in those early days to step forward and be counted. The numbers who would actually endure the scorn of a separation from a mainline denomination would always be less than expected.

Dr. Smith was chosen as the Stated Clerk of the first general assembly of the PCA. He has faithfully done the job ever since. One crucial hour no doubt tested his loyalty to service in the church of Christ more than any other. He had

Continued on page 4

The Sixteenth General Assembly of the PCA: The Issues at Hand

by David F. Coffin, Jr.

The PCA's Sixteenth General Assembly might well be styled the year of the Ad Interim Committee: not the one (On Restructure), but the many (On Aids, On Fencing the Lord's Table, On Freemasonry, On Paedocommunion, On Heroic Measures, and On Restructure). A number of these Committees have been waiting to report for some time, having been postponed because of the press of business at previous Assemblies. Others were established at last year's Assembly and are either offering preliminary reports, or finished products for commissioners' consideration.

The Committee on Aids has presented a lengthy (41 pages) preliminary report. One trembles to think what may be before a later Assembly if this is merely preliminary. From the first mailing of the Commissioner's handbook, it is unclear whether the Committee on Fencing the Table will offer a report this year, particularly since the funding technique adopted by the Assembly (by private donations) did not provide enough money for the Committee to meet. This issue, however, growing out of a constitutional inquiry and related to a controversial judicial case settled at last year's Assembly, will surely stir considerable interest among the commissioners.

Continued on page 3

Session to Session

The Committee on Freemasonry is proposing a final report, concluding a two year study of the matter. Brief by comparison, both with its previous report, and the offerings of the other Committees, the Committee on Freemasonry has provided a model for the Assembly in its clear articulation of the question at hand, its firm answer grounded in biblical truth, its sympathetic treatment of opposition, and its charitable and patient advice for dealing with PCA officers involved in Freemasonry. The long postponed report from the Committee on Paedocommunion brings the Assembly a divided Committee, a minority report being offered by TE Robert S. Rayburn. This minority report advocates the practice of Paedocommunion in a closely argued paper twice the length of the Committee's efforts (much more if one counts the extensive footnotes). TE Rayburn concludes by asking that the Assembly "find the minority report to be in agreement with the Scripture." This will raise some difficulty, of course, since the Constitution of the PCA clearly asserts the contrary (*Larger Catechism* Q. 177, "... the Lord's supper is to be administered . . . only to such as are of years and ability to examine themselves"). Useful reading in preparation for this debate can be found in the masterful essay of Jonathan Edwards on this subject, "Qualifications for Communion" (*Works*, I:431-531).

The Committee on Heroic Measures (not, incidentally, a study of Ollie North) has not included a report in the Commissioner's Handbook, but it has been assigned a very difficult task ("At what point do modern medical approaches attempt to usurp the life/death authority of God") and may well not be prepared to report at this Assembly.

Finally, the long-running Ad Interim Committee on Restructure appears to have completed its task. Though its proposals have stirred a fair measure of controversy in the Church, there will almost certainly be a unanimous vote on its second recommendation this year: "That the Ad-Interim Committee be dismissed." Before the Assembly reaches this happy moment however, it will have to consider the Committee's proposals for restructuring the Committee on Administration (COA) and the Office of the Stated Clerk.

Given the number of Ad Interim Committees reporting, and the continued financial troubles of the Committee on Administration (due to a lack of funds COA placed a moratorium on committee meetings in January and February), it comes as no surprise that the Committee is recommending to this year's Assembly that the Rules of Assembly Operation be amended to limit the Assembly to two ad interim committees (appointed or continued) in any given year. Unfortunately for the Committee, because it is so difficult to find enough commissioners on the floor of the Assembly to even consider a rule change, the proposal must come up as a special order in the opening hours of the first day. One suspects that if the vote were taken after all of the Ad Interim Committees reported, COA's chances for success in the matter would be greatly increased.

At this Assembly the Stated Clerk's Office will find itself the center of attention through several items of business.

Not only does an Ad Interim Committee address the structure of this office, the Assembly will have to consider its "content" as well. After serving with distinction as Stated Clerk since the inception of the denomination, Dr. Morton H. Smith will retire from office this year to return to full-time teaching at Greenville Theological Seminary. Thus the Assembly must choose a successor. The new Clerk will perhaps find himself in possession of a new job description, since COA is proposing just such a description in its report.

COA is also presenting a statement of "Summary Positions" taken from the report of the Church/State Subcommittee which was considered at last year's Assembly. This lengthy report, making recommendations concerning incorporation, taxation, education and civil disobedience, was, to the great disappointment of many, received by the Assembly with little or no debate. The Assembly's action inspired both a formal protest, and a motion that the subcommittee prepare summaries of its arguments and recommendations for adoption by the Sixteenth General Assembly. The summaries thus before commissioners propose positions and policies related to the topics mentioned above. The most striking concerns the "Propriety of the Christian's Nonviolent Disobedience to the Civil Magistrate in the Abortion Controversy". In this brief paragraph the Committee would have the Assembly adopt the view that, "If a Christian attempts to fulfill this duty [under the sixth commandment to "preserve, protect and promote the lives of the unborn"] by interposing himself between the abortionist and the unborn child, he is justified in his actions, even though his action may be contrary to the civil law." One wonders if the adoption of this position will set a new precedent for the moral reasoning of the Assembly. Shall we have justifications for civil disobedience related to other points of the moral law? Perhaps Christians should raid college dormitories and "directly intervene in a non-violent way" for the sake of stopping sexual promiscuity (the seventh commandment) or better, block the doors of liberal churches to prevent false worship (the first commandment). In fact, by the Committee's own reasoning this latter "direct intervention" ought to take precedence over the abortion protests: "... do not fear those who kill the body . . . but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28). There is great pressure to assist and comfort brothers and sisters in Christ who are courageously attempting to end abortion in our land. Yet even in the face of the great wickedness of abortion, one hopes that the Assembly will consider this matter with appropriate calm and deliberation, as a blanket endorsement of the Committee's recommendation may well lead members of the PCA down the perilous path of anarchy.

On other matters relating to Christian morality and cases of conscience, several overtures before the Assembly ask the Church to take up the question of Aids, divorce, and pornography. The Aids proposal, from Covenant Presbytery, asks for a committee to "prepare pastoral guidelines" for those ministering to Aids victims. Safe sex, however,

Session to Session

gets a rap, as does (by implication) the Surgeon General. The Overture requests that Dr. Koop "use the powers of his office to make clear to the nation that there is no such thing as safe sex outside the commands of Almighty God." Though sympathetic to the concerns of brother presbyters from Covenant, one cannot help but suspect that the fallacy of equivocation is lurking in the text.

Philadelphia Presbytery is overturing the Assembly to appoint yet another committee, in this case to re-examine the Confession of Faith on divorce and remarriage. So great is their concern over the historic position of the Presbyterian Church on this matter that the overture requests that this new committee "suggest any revisions to that article [Chapter 26.4] of the Confession it deems appropriate." In what is to my knowledge a new twist on the appointing of committees, the overture stipulates that at least one third of the members of this panel shall be persons who are "professionally trained and experienced in marital counselling." So far as I know, none of the members of the Westminster Assembly had that benefit, and therefore if this committee is appointed, perhaps the Church can expect a proposal for Confessional revision. That in itself may be reason for voting to limit the number of ad interim committees.

In what is sure to be an intense moment at the Assembly, Ascension Presbytery, rightly outraged over the soul-destroying effect of pornography, is asking the Court to "re-buke the 1988 General Assembly Planning Committee for using the facilities of Holiday Inn . . . while having full knowledge of their association with pornography." Further, Ascension's overture calls on the Assembly to boycott Holiday Inn (and other offending hostelrys), and urge the same on all its committees, agencies, and members. While Ascension is to be commended for their zeal, one hopes that the Assembly will require a bit more knowledge before it takes up the cause of boycotting various offending worldly institutions, or rebuking the Planning Committee. Memories of the General Assembly of former denominations racked by endless debates concerning boycotts of various corporations and countries should in itself give the PCA pause before it follows others down this road. Further, though the Church is clearly called to stand against the world (1 John 5:4), this stance cannot imply that it not associate with the immoral people of this world: to do so it would have to go out of the world altogether (1 Cor. 5:9-10). Unless the Assembly is prepared to argue that a boycott is biblically necessary, such actions are a matter of prudence and strategy, and as such, are best left to the conscience of individuals apart from the deliverances of church courts. If we are to engage more vigorously in the battle against pornography, perhaps a better method would be to encourage Christians to stay at Holiday Inns and while so doing take the opportunity to remind those who not only do evil, but give hearty approval to others who do so, that the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men (Romans 1:18ff). Unfortunately, those who face the wrath of Christian boycotters

often are distracted from this point, and yet "Christ would have us to be certainly persuaded that there shall be a day of judgment . . . to deter all men from sin." (WCF 33.3). (The propriety of the Church's use of economic boycotts as a method of sanction is discussed by Edmund P. Clowney in "The Politics of the Kingdom," *Westminster Theological Journal*, Spring 1979, pp. 291-310.)

On matters of church government the Sixteenth General Assembly faces a host of proposals to modify the *Book of Church Order (BCO)*. Some appear to be nothing more than minor adjustments. Others demand more careful scrutiny. In this class, two overtures before the Court request a change in the *BCO* to allow ministers to be members of local congregations. Two others call for methods to enforce equal representation of Ruling and Teaching Elders at General Assembly. Continuing this pattern of pairs, two overtures request changes in the *BCO* that would make it clear that officers cannot be imposed upon a congregation apart from its consent. Finally, overtures in this class include a proposal from Northern Illinois to amend the membership vows, and an overture from Southeast Alabama that would change the *BCO* to permit names of members to be removed from the roll of a church by other than full disciplinary process. Without commenting on the merits of these overtures, it should be clear that in each case both the substance of the matter, and the language proposed, must be carefully examined. Claiming as we do that the government of the church must be founded on the Word of God, the burden of proof lies with those who propose these changes, to show either that they are warranted by the express or implied teaching of the Scripture, or that they are matters "common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word" (WCF 1.6).

Finally, the Sixteenth General Assembly of the PCA faces the daunting task of adopting a new Directory For Worship. Composed by the Committee on Judicial Business, the proposed directory has already generated considerable discussion. Several elders from Northeast Presbytery have voiced their dissatisfaction with the Committee's work by offering an overture that includes extensive revisions. Many, it seems clear, will be satisfied with neither. There can be no question but that there exists in the PCA a broad diversity of opinion concerning the practice of worship. The days when Presbyterian churches were noted for their unity in commitment to the "regulative principle" are long past. "Creativity" in worship ("imaginings and devices of men"?! WCF 21.1) is considered by many a virtue. Further, the whole matter is complicated by a widespread uncertainty as to the proper constitutional status of a directory for worship. This may be the most demanding issue that commissioners will face during a very full week of deliberations. And yet perhaps no issue is of greater importance, for worship that is acceptable to God is of the very essence of the Church, both in this world, and in the world to come.

A/Ω

Session to Session

to choose whether to serve as seminary professor or as Stated Clerk. His inclination naturally was to continue with his full-time role as teacher of the deep truths of God. But his loyalty to the church of Christ dictated that he take on the clerk's job instead.

Only few have known just how much he has missed the joy of teaching the truths of Scripture as his full-time occupation. But in loyalty to Christ's church, he has given himself vigorously to the job of Stated Clerk.

Once again the time has come for Dr. Smith to play the

role of a pioneer. With the same vision that led him to Belhaven, to RTS, and to the PCA, Dr. Smith has committed himself to the establishment of another center for the promotion of the Biblical faith. As founding professor of Greenville Theological Seminary, he breaks new ground again.

This summer his journey will take him to South Carolina by way of South Africa, where he will be lecturing, preaching and teaching at various conference centers, churches and seminaries. Since here is no English-speaking presbyterian church in South Africa committed to the Westminster Standards, don't be surprised if he returns with the report of a new church being formed in that most beautiful but most troubled land.

Let us together offer our thanks and prayers to God for the servants he sends to bless his church. A/Ω

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