

Session to Session

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Post-Assembly Thoughts of a Ruling Elder

by Will Thompson, M.D.

Several thoughts have occupied my mind ever since returning from the PCA's 16th General Assembly in Knoxville, Tennessee. I'm sure most of the commissioners who attend a G.A. have "withdrawal" from such an intense and at times frustrating week.

I must admit that going to G.A. is not my idea of a week of vacation time. But I know that God works all things for good to those who love him and are called according to his purpose—even attending the General Assembly! The week in Knoxville was a good experience, even though I continue to be concerned over much that occurred.

How spiritually blessed I was when gathered with 1,500 brothers and sisters in Christ singing, "All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name," and hearing R. C. Sproul preach on the grand and glorious truth of predestination! The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper on the opening day of the Assembly was a true blessing from God. How thankful I am to be saved! How thankful I am for my church! How thankful I am to be joined with the brothers in the PCA by the common bond of the blood of our God and Savior Jesus Christ!

God taught me much by my attending this Assembly. One thing I hope I have finally learned is that God has called us as elders to govern and rule his Church, and as a commissioner I must take seriously my duties of oversight and authority.

As I have reflected upon this past G.A., I have several concerns. My most serious concern is that as a church we aren't sure just what we want to be. Last year we were ready to take a giant step toward becoming congregationalists. Many are glad that the presbyteries stopped us. This year we may be taking the first step toward elevating certain ministers and elders above others, which is a form of prelacy. At least we seem ready to become "practical prelatists," just as we too often are "practical atheists" or "practical deists." We say we are presbyterian, but in practice we function as a hierarchy. What the G.A. did in attempting a "restructure" of itself was to set itself more and more on a course which moves the authority and power of the church away from the courts of the church and localizes this power and authority in certain committee members and in the stated clerk.

At its formation, the PCA recognized the potential danger of power and authority being given to permanent committees.

committees in different states so that these committees could not even appear to be gathering to themselves authority that didn't belong to them.

But now as I perceive the relationship that exists between the permanent committees and the G.A. through the committees of commissioners, the permanent committees develop the policies and the committees of commissioners approve them. I recognize that sometimes the committees of commissioners

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The Sufficiency of Scripture

by H. Andrew Silman

[Editor's note: One of the great blessings at the PCA General Assembly is hearing from the presbyteries. The following article is excerpted from an address given at a worship service sponsored by the Louisiana Presbytery.]

As elders of the Presbyterian Church in America, we have answered the liberals who tell us the Bible is not the Word of God. We have repudiated the view that says the Bible becomes the Word of God only when it zaps you, warms you, gives you goose bumps, or makes you feel better. We have done fairly well answering "experience-ism" which affirms that God continues to give us revelation alongside the Bible. We have made clear our rejection of any view of Scripture that says the Bible reflects ancient misconceptions and antiquated prejudices that cannot speak authoritatively to a sophisticated society on matters such as homosexuality and women's rights. In answering all these errors, we have done well.

But in one critical area we have failed. We have failed to sound a clear and certain response to those who question the sufficiency of Scripture. A growing number affirm in principle the Bible to be the Word of God, inspired and infallible as originally given; but these same people do not affirm that Scripture is sufficient in itself to make the man and woman of God thoroughly equipped for every good work. In this subtle way the sufficiency of Scripture is being seriously questioned in our day.

King David emphasized the sufficiency of God's revelation in Psalm 19. Six different titles elevate Scripture in this psalm: Law, Statutes, Precepts, Commands, Fear, and Ordinances. Six different characteristics describe Scripture: Perfect, Trustworthy, Right, Radiant, Pure, and Sure. Six different benefits commend Scripture: it revives the soul; it makes wise

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change certain recommendations that come from the permanent committees. But it seems to me that the general attitude of the commissioners is one of being ready to approve the permanent committees' actions rather than themselves exercising their proper authority and power in instructing and directing the permanent committees to carry out the court's wishes and policies.

Could we already be wandering off our moorings in Biblical presbyterianism by shifting authority and power to committees and boards rather than retaining them in the courts, especially the presbyteries?

If I am correct in my assessment as a ruling elder, I want to place a good portion of the blame at the ruling elders' feet. By and large we as ruling elders don't take seriously our calling as elders. We call ourselves presbyterian, but do we know what it really means to be presbyterian? Do we really understand the issues involved and how they are to be addressed from a presbyterian perspective? Maybe some of us think that it is okay to delegate authority to committees or boards. We need to take care that we delegate to others only those matters that God allows us to delegate. Certainly he does not want us to delegate the authority and power which he calls us to exercise as elders. Let us as ruling elders become more involved in the decisions of our church which will affect not only us but our children and our children's children.

There were around 1,100 commissioners registered as attending the G.A.. Yet on several important votes only about 75% of the registered commissioners were present to vote, even after the "Sargents-at-Arms" recruited all available commissioners from the auditorium. Where were the other three or four hundred commissioners? What were they doing? No doubt some were detained for providential reasons. But why weren't the rest exercising the duty of rule and oversight? Sad to say it appears that many may have been enjoying sightseeing or a game of tennis or golf. For some elders, the General Assembly seems to be another paid vacation. Personally, I would favor encouraging commissioners not to bring their wives or children and to devote the time exclusively to the work of the church.

Another major change has to do with the office of stated clerk and its relationship to the permanent committees and the Assembly. For the past 15 years our church has been nobly served by Dr. Morton Smith, whose view of the office of stated clerk has kept him from using the influence of his office in a way that would determine issues of controversy in the church. He has deliberately sought to remain independent of the permanent committees or boards of the Assembly. Dr. Smith's posture toward the position of the stated clerk represents not only his own humility, but also his recognition of the potential danger of a single individual's assuming more power and authority than he ought.

But the proposed restructuring makes the stated clerk "Chief Administrative Officer" of the General Assembly. He will become the official public spokesman for the denomination. This new concept will make the office subject to potential

abuse of power and authority.

We have been given the assurance that this "restructuring" will be in effect only for a four-year trial basis. We are told that if we aren't satisfied with the new arrangement, we can simply change again. But any change like this will set a course which will be virtually impossible to reverse. We must express appreciation to the ad-interim committee for their sincere effort to improve the workings of our church. But we must make changes only when they are consistent with our understanding of the Biblical view of the Church.

Since its inception the PCA has promoted the idea that it is a "grass roots denomination." I like to believe this concept refers to a Biblical presbyterianism in which authority rests not in men, boards, or committees, but in the courts of our church composed of a parity of ruling and teaching elders who deliberate and decide in open discussion after prayer and enlightenment from the Word. Only as we seek to be Biblical can we expect God to bless our efforts as a church.

Finally, there is a significant problem in the number of ruling elders that serve at the General Assembly. At the first General Assembly, 54% of the commissioners were ruling elders. This year only about 30% of the commissioners were ruling elders. Something must be done about this imbalance. A delegated Assembly may be the solution. Some compromise may have to be reached to limit teaching elder participation. But some, if not most, of the problem lies with the ruling elders themselves. If we have 950 churches in the PCA, at least 1,000 ruling elders could have been commissioners. But only about 300 came.

Some of us don't want the frustration of working with a "bunch of preachers." Others don't want to make the sacrifice it requires in lost income while away from our calling, or lose a week of vacation time. These reasons have their appeal, but in the end they all represent a practical rejection of presbyterianism. May God grant us repentance where necessary and grace to assume our responsibilities.

One valid consideration which may be hindering some ruling elders from attending could be financial. Many small churches cannot afford to send a commissioner to the General Assembly because of lack of funds.

Maybe presbyteries or sister churches could establish a fund to help send representatives from the smaller churches. Maybe some churches ought to send a ruling elder rather than their teaching elder if they cannot send both. If we really believe that it is Biblical to have larger numbers of ruling elders at the General Assembly, then surely by God's grace we can find a way.

May God grant the PCA the grace to please and to glorify Him as we wait for the return of Jesus, Our King and Savior.

Dr. Thompson is a practicing physician and a Ruling Elder in the PCA. Among other responsibilities in the church, he has served as a member of the General Assembly's committee that studied the matter of abortion, and as a trustee of Covenant Seminary.

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the simple; it gives joy to the heart; it gives light to the eyes; it endures forever; it is altogether righteous.

Concentrate for a moment on Psalm 19:7: "The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul." The word "perfect" literally means "all-sided," covering all aspects of a thing. The Word of God is flawless, comprehensive, all-sufficient.

Scripture is sufficient for every feature of spiritual life. Not some, not many, not most—but *all* aspects of spiritual life. Yet growing doubt concerning the sufficiency of the Scriptures continues to foster disbelief with respect to its greatness. A few examples may help make the matter concrete.

First, our denomination emphasizes planting new churches and revitalizing established churches. This vision is proper and needed. But how do you go about building the church? Walk into just about any Christian bookstore. There you get the overwhelming impression that the secret to building and revitalizing the church is to be found in better management. Look to the *One Minute Manager*. It will organize your schedule in a way that will guarantee a revitalized church.

Management is important. The ministries of many could be enhanced by better management. I've read the *One Minute Manager*. I've taken courses in management, and always find some helpful bits of information that can be useful for the ministry. But I do not believe that corporate America has the answers that will guarantee success in building the church of the Lord Jesus either numerically or organically.

Is priority of trust really being directed to the Word of God? Are the Scriptures a sufficient guide to win the lost and build them up into a vital body of disciples, or are they not? Where do you put your faith?

Then there is an increasing emphasis on entertainment, especially as a way of evangelistic outreach. The assumption is that we must entertain people if we wish to attract them. We condone hard rock music as a means for reaching our young people. But what do we do once we have attracted them? Sad to say, we have already committed ourselves to continue entertaining them. Our theme song is practically the same as Gypsy Rose Lee's: "Let me entertain you!"

The Apostle Paul did no song and dance routine at the Areopagus. Rather, he pointed these polytheistic philosophers to the living God. He told them to repent of their sin and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. They were accustomed to entertainment, but they got something else.

The results? Some sneered. Some wanted to hear more. A few became followers of the Lord. Perhaps we ought to be less concerned with the nondescript numbers brought in by entertainment and more concerned that the Spirit of God do his work of adding to the church those who have been genuinely converted through the bold, bare proclamation of the Word.

Thirdly, there is a segment of the church that would promise health, wealth, and prosperity to all who would come to Christ. But I've yet to read in the Word that God is a celestial Mary Kay handing out pink Cadillacs as an incentive to potential converts. To grow numerically we must hand out door prizes?

At a meeting of the American Association of Bible Colleges

held a few years ago a faculty member from a well-known evangelical seminary gave a keynote address. He said, and I quote: "The simple gospel is not adequate without signs and wonders." Doesn't this statement imply that the Bible in and of itself is insufficient to convert the soul? Doesn't it espouse the view that you also must have a little magic?

Still further: even in evangelical and reformed seminaries it is sometimes taught that the Bible is not a textbook on psychology or counseling. Therefore we must look to scholars in the scientific field of psychology.

But is not this outlook promoting a view that the Scriptures are inadequate for every feature of spiritual life? Instead of looking to the Word of God for answers concerning the human condition, instead of learning how to deal with emotional and spiritual problems from the Bible, we must turn to the writings of secular psychologists.

Indeed we can profit from the study of human behavior. But we can learn a thousand times more about the nature of man by studying Scripture. New York University Professor Paul Vitz, a Roman Catholic, criticizes his own church (and perhaps ours as well) when he says it has a tendency to buy high and sell low with regard to the social sciences. He complains that his church adopts popular trends of thought just as secular professionals begin to subject those thoughts to serious criticism. Vitz says: "Why is it that the church is always climbing on the bandwagon just about the time it's slowing down?"

There is yet another attack on the sufficiency of Scripture that comes from those who would tell us: "We'll never have revival in America until we have a Christian Congress." I don't believe that. We will never accomplish with politics what we can accomplish by preaching and teaching the whole counsel of God.

How subtle, yet how persistently the sufficiency of Scripture is being challenged. I trust we're not questioning it. I would remind us that the Psalmist tells us that the law of the Lord is perfect. It is "all-sided," covering completely all facets of a thing. It is flawless; comprehensive; sufficient. I would remind us that the Apostle Paul said: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be *thoroughly equipped for every good work*" (II Timothy 3:16). Do we believe that? Can we assert with Paul: "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16)? Can we say with David, "The Law of the Lord is perfect, reviving, converting, transforming the soul"?

I'm living proof that God's Word is sufficient for salvation. I recall as a 19 year old sitting in a pew of my home church. It was the historic First Presbyterian Church of Augusta, Georgia, birthplace of the PCUS, from which many of our churches made their exodus in 1973. A new minister was called to the church. He stood in that elevated pulpit Lord's Day after Lord's Day with an audacity that declared: "Thus saith the Lord!" Prior to that time I had no idea God had said anything of significance. Within only a few months the Spirit

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of God had worked conviction into my cold, calloused heart. I was revived, I was converted, I was given the privilege and honor of bowing down before Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior. The Law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul.

But in all honesty I must tell you that this kind of preaching based on the sufficiency of Scripture had quite the opposite effect on other long-time members of that church. They would not listen to such preaching. They left the church.

But the preaching of the whole counsel of God has built that

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Don't be afraid to put your trust in the sufficiency of the Word of God. God's Word will never return empty. The Scriptures are altogether sufficient to convert, to build up, to make complete. Teach the Word, in season and out of season. Preach with clarity, preach with boldness. "For the Law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The precepts of the Lord are more precious than gold, than much pure gold, sweeter than honey from the comb."

Hyperbole? Not in my opinion. I trust not in yours.

Mr. Silman is pastor of Plains Presbyterian Church, Zachary, Louisiana.

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