

Session to Session

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

February / March 1989, Vol. 3, No. 1

Discipline and Restoration

by Frederick S. Kuhl

Few Christians today have seen the awesome impact of excommunication result in the repentance and restoration of an offender. We earnestly believe that "the design of this censure is to operate on the offender as a means of reclaiming him, to deliver the Church from the scandal of his offense, and to inspire all with fear by the example of his discipline" [PCA *Book of Church Order* 30-4]. While we may have seen discipline remove scandal and inspire awe, the actual reclamation of an offender is much more rare among us. The following is the story of a case where the Lord has done his great work of bringing an excommunicated member back into full fellowship.

Early in the spring of 1985, three young men in our congregation who were recent converts had been attending private meetings in New Jersey where they were being taught a number of things contrary to the Scripture. These men had reputations among us as earnest, serious believers. They set a welcome example of piety among the members of the congregation who were unmarried. But reports also came from time to time that some people were disturbed at some of their behavior and views. It was rather natural to chalk up the disturbance to their youth and their stricter than average sabbath-keeping.

But then it became apparent that they were convinced that our congregation was seriously deficient spiritually, even apostate. They had been propagating this opinion among their single friends by playing tapes of the leader of the meetings in New Jersey.

At this point, I felt compelled to confront one of the men, generally regarded as the dominant one of the three, who was a personal friend, and over whom I had particular responsibility for oversight as an elder. This man was quite emphatic in his view that our church as a whole was derelict in its devotion to Christ and was near being cast off by the Lord. While I could find plenty in my own life and in the congregation's life that would grieve the Lord, I certainly thought his judgment was wide of the mark.

The man who previously had sought and listened to my counsel in a number of matters wasn't listening now. So three meetings were held with the three men, both pastors in the church, and several members of the session. We now dis-

covered that these men "knew" the date of Christ's imminent return and that they expected a general apostasy of the entire visible church, including our own, before Christ appeared. If this weren't enough, they had acquired a radically spiritualizing method of interpreting scripture that made it pretty well impossible for us to reason with them on the basis of the clearest teaching of the Word of God. They agreed to cease propagating the New Jersey tapes, but they refused

Continued on page 2

A Representative Church

by William M. Brailsford

Two forces generally conspire against a published history of an individual congregation. Since the work is usually small in size, it is often regarded as unimportant—and because such histories are characteristically not much more than a roster of the pastors, interest never expands further than the congregation in question. Yet as J. I. Packer's famous *Introductory Essay* to John Owen's *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* has shown us, the size of a work is of no concern when the subject matter is handled well; and A Press's *History of Fishing Creek Presbyterian Church* (Greenville, S.C., 1983) has proven that a congregational or regional history can have denominational significance as well.

Gary M. Frazier's *A History of Tabb Street Presbyterian Church* (Petersburg, VA: Tabb Street Presbyterian Church, 1988) follows in the tradition of these works. Its size and immediate scope are no indication of its importance or wide-ranging interest. Frazier follows the history of Tabb Street, an historic PCA congregation in downtown Petersburg, Virginia, from its beginnings in the context of nascent Virginia Presbyterianism to the formation of the PCA in 1973. His *History*, while a detailed observance and remembrance of one particular congregation, is also an admirable overview of the history of orthodox Presbyterianism in America, and its struggle through nearly two centuries to cleave to the confessional standards of its fathers.

Hanover Presbytery, for years Tabb Street's ecclesiastical home, was born in the Old Side-New Side controversy of the 18th century; Hanover was an Old Side Presbytery. Yet it wasn't until 1807 that Petersburg saw any regular Presbyterian ministry. The new nation was maturing, and Southside Virginia, long under the dominance of the Episcopal Church, began to see an important influx of an

Continued on page 3

Session to Session

Discipline and Restoration, continued from page 1

to hear our counsel that they should drop out altogether from the meetings of that group.

Out of a desire to see these brothers helped before it was too late, I determined to ask the session to begin a formal process of discipline. At the time I was in the middle of my rookie year on a session most of whose members were old enough to be my father. While I knew that our session had a history of being staunch for the gospel, no formal disciplinary process had been carried out for a very long time. My concern over the session's response to this proposal was relieved when it came out that the three men in the meantime had sent a letter to all the officers of the church, accusing them and the church as a whole of apostasy! The session was compelled to act.

Several members of the session had a further meeting with the men in order to warn them that schism was a gross crime against Christ and his church which could result in excommunication. They were unmoved. Charges of schism, various heresies, and willful resistance to correction ("incurability" and "contumacy" in the *Book of Church Order*) were prepared. The process required a little study of the *Book of Church Order*, but with some long distance help from Morton H. Smith, we were enabled to understand proper procedures. As the one appointed prosecutor, I must say I was impressed with the care for the truth and for fairness for the accused reflected in the *Book of Church Order*.

To this point the affair had retained a low profile. However, when the defendants were cited to appear, they responded by writing another letter, and unfortunately mailing it to everyone on an outdated church membership list. In the letter they repeated their various charges, and invited the membership of the church to the trial.

The hearing was attended by many members of the congregation, as well as many members of the New Jersey group. The moderator of our session was able to walk with good balance the difficult road of letting the accused be heard fairly while not allowing a theological debate to develop. The moderator even allowed one of the leaders of the New Jersey group to give evidence, though not allowing him to preach. The openness of the trial proved to be a good experience. It was very good for the congregation in attendance to hear first hand the accusations and to see the spirit in which they were brought. In the end, the session (less prosecutor) voted unanimously to excommunicate the men for their absolute refusal to manifest a teachable spirit.

Many on the session naturally were concerned about how the congregation would respond to the whole process. The Lord was very gracious. The problem was made clear to everyone, and the commitment of the session to deal fairly became apparent. A number of members remarked that their questions about the appropriateness of the session's formal discipline were answered by attendance at the trial. The session's authority was enhanced, as the congregation saw that the elders were thoroughly committed to the Scripture's authority, even to the point of following its teaching

when it led in an inconvenient or even dangerous way.

The whole of the congregation was sobered by the experience. The trial actually raised useful questions about our devotion to Christ and the vigor of our commitment to preaching and living the gospel in its fullness. The defendant's challenging of my own devotion had exposed areas of personal weakness, and others felt similarly.

Soon after the trial, calls came from pastors of other churches in the area who were undergoing similar problems with members of their churches influenced by the same New Jersey group. Indeed, the accusatory letters sent first to our officers and then to the entire membership were typical of what members of this group did in other congregations. By our experience we were able to encourage other congregations.

After the trial, the three men left and we had little contact with them personally, although many of us prayed for them regularly. Two of them who had family living in other states moved out of the area. We subsequently heard that two of the men also dropped their connection with the New Jersey group. The date that had been announced for the Lord's return came and went.

Then about three years after the trial, the session got a letter from one of the men who had moved out of state. He expressed sorrow for what he had done and asked to meet with the session. We wrote back immediately, expressing our joy and willingness to meet with him. He came over a weekend. The session heard a remarkable testimony of his growing conviction that he had done wrong, and his earnest desire to be reconciled. The Book of Church Order prescribes a form for restoration that includes some stiff questions for the repentant person to answer in public. This man was willing to answer all these questions before the session and again in a formal service of restoration during public worship. It was wonderful to see the brother's gladness to be among us again and to respond to his eagerness to be reunited. I and others who had known him well before sat with him during the service. After the service, many people, including some who had not been in attendance at the time of the trial, greeted him warmly. There were a great number of moist eyes that evening.

At the trial it had been apparent that this man particularly was distressed by the verdict. After he moved away he became increasingly disturbed by what he saw in the New Jersey group which led to his breaking with it. He began attending an Orthodox Presbyterian church near his home, and grew in his realization that he should be reconciled to us. It would have been so easy for him to slide into another congregation out of state without anyone questioning the condition of his previous church membership. We are especially thankful to the Lord for a sister denomination like the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, where he could not have been received as a member in good standing without first having been reconciled.

The restored brother now plans to write the other two men and explain what he has done. He intends to urge them

Session to Session

to do likewise.

What are the lessons from our blessing in this experience? Not first that formal discipline is both necessary and salutary: that lesson we learn by faith in the Scripture, and we retain that lesson by faith even in the face of an unpleasant experience.

But God was gracious to our congregation. The discipline was good for us in the long run, though painful in the short run. I've learned a good deal about the procedures for formal discipline, which I would be happy never to use again. I've also learned to keep a better eye on what my fellow members are reading, and especially on what outside groups they participate in. The New Jersey group was introduced to our men at a conference sponsored by a respected local Christian radio station.

But chiefly I thank the Lord for having allowed me to see His graciousness at work with the repentant brother. Because there is hope, I pray that the Lord might grant repentance, that the other two men be restored to us as well.

Dr. Kuhl is a ruling elder at Wallace Memorial Presbyterian Church.

A Representative Church, continued from page 1

immigrant population in the Reformed tradition. By 1813, Tabb Street's young congregation was making a mark in the area. One of its first pastors, Benjamin Holt Rice, was the brother of John Holt Rice, the founder of Union Theological Seminary. Frazier chronicles the congregation's early years as it sought to establish itself in Petersburg, and as Presbyterianism sought to do the same in the region at large. New structures had to be acquired as the church grew in numbers; new pastors secured as others moved on. In 1837, the church faced a split as the Old School-New School debate over the Plan of Union affected congregations around the country. Tabb Street lost a minority of its members to the New School. Frazier then lets us feel the anguish as Tabb Street experienced the fall of Petersburg to Union troops on April 3rd 1865, and how her pastor, Robert Lewis Dabney, fled the city with the retreating Confederate army. Union troops, recounts the author, used Tabb Street's 180 foot tall steeple as a target in their shelling of Petersburg.

Churches and pastors in the South faced Reconstruction just as did the region. With pulpits draped in black by Federal rule to mourn Abraham Lincoln's death, ministers had to take an oath of fealty to the United States Constitution before they could perform a marriage ceremony or participate in civic functions. In 1882, twenty-one years after the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America was formed (the PCUS after the War), there were still no formal relations between the separated northern and southern Presbyterian churches. Frazier outlines the struggle, from Tabb Street's perspective, of coming to terms with the idea of Union. As he notes, by the

time the two churches merged, Tabb Street had entered another denomination.

As the church entered its second century, the denomination steeled itself against the forces of modernism. Ernest Trice Thompson's comment that the PCUS was led by "the dead hand of the past" and should strive "toward theological maturity" was at the heart of the issue that Frazier says "would eventually force Tabb Street to leave the PCUS in an effort to remain tied to the conservative roots which had nourished it since its birth in 1813." This was not the only stand Tabb Street had to take, for in 1965 it faced the inevitable decision of the downtown congregation—whether or not to serve the city or the suburbs, to pull up roots or fight the growing unease of the urban setting. Unlike most, Tabb Street stayed in the city, but not without losing many of its members.

As Mr. Frazier closes his *History*, he reports that many Presbyterians felt the need for a reform movement within the PCUS. As the PCUS took Dr. Thompson's advice and grasped the golden ring of theological decline, this concern eventually led to the establishment of the National Presbyterian Church in 1973, which became the Presbyterian Church in America. Tabb Street signaled its displeasure with the PCUS by its involvement in Concerned Presbyterians, and moved into the PCA in 1976, but not without Hanover Presbytery bringing the congregation to civil court and suing for the property and building which had housed Tabb Street for 130 years. Thankfully, Tabb Street was able to keep its property, but the bitter taste of a civil court battle is not easy to lose. The author notes, "It was shameful spectacles such as this that provided for the provision in the church laws of the PCA that state unequivocally that each local congregation is the sole owner of its property."

When we finish the short but powerful account of this historic church, we realize we have been reading our own history. From the Old Side-New Side dilemma in which it was born, through the Plan of Union debate, the Civil War, the struggle for denominational identity, the rising tide of modernism and eventually the need to break ties with the old and familiar, we know that what Tabb Street has seen fully we all have experienced in part. The questions of growth, the urban-suburban debate, the threat of property loss: almost every congregation has met or will meet similar trials. As a denomination we can learn from such a record. That Tabb Street has survived and remained true to its founding call is not only a testimony to the elders and people who have served throughout its history, but even more so to God's gracious provision for his faithful people. Despite its size, this little book deserves attention. We wish Tabb Street God's blessings as it makes preparation for its 200th year.

William M. Brailsford is Managing Editor for Berea Publications. Gary M. Frazier's A History of Tabb Street Presbyterian Church is available from the church, which is located at 29 W. Tabb Street, Petersburg, Virginia, 23803.

Session to Session

Good Reading

Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1989, 430 pp.

Dr. Hughes's "governing premise is that the doctrine of man (anthropology) can be truly apprehended only in the light of the doctrine of Christ (christology)." Much of Dr. Hughes's study focuses on the meaning of the image of God, arguing that "conformity to the image of God is essentially Christiformity."

Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *No Cross, No Crown: The Temptations of Jesus*. Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow, 1988, 86 pp.

In the wake of Martin Scorsese's troublesome film, this short book on the temptations of Christ in the wilderness is a refreshing meditation on the significance for us of Jesus' overcoming of temptation.

Edmund P. Clowney, *The Unfolding Mystery: Discovering Christ in the Old Testament*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1988, 202 pp.

What would the Bible study on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35) have covered? Beginning with creation, and continuing through the prophets, Dr. Clowney offers a rewarding study of the teaching of Old Testament concerning Christ.

Don't miss a single issue of *Session to Session*!
Mail this coupon to *Session to Session*
Wallace Memorial Presbyterian Church
7201 Sixteenth Place, Hyattsville, MD 20783-4399

☐ Yes...

Include me as an individual supporter of *Session to Session*. Enclosed is \$10.00 for the first year.

☐ Yes...

Include us as a "supporting Session" for *Session to Session*. Enclosed is \$100 for our Session members for the first year. Also enclosed is a list of the names and addresses of our Session members.

name _____

address _____

city _____ state _____ zip _____

Make checks payable to
Wallace Memorial Presbyterian Church

Session to Session is dedicated to promoting the strengthening and growth of Biblical Presbyterianism in America. It is published bimonthly by the Session of Wallace Memorial Presbyterian Church, located in the Washington, D.C. suburb of Hyattsville, Maryland. Individual subscriptions are available for \$10.00 per year. Church Sessions donating \$100 per year will receive subscriptions for all elders. Send all inquiries to Session to Session, Wallace Memorial Presbyterian Church, 7201 Sixteenth Place, Hyattsville, MD 20783-4399.

2-3/89

Executive Editor: O. Palmer Robertson

Managing Editor: Kenneth A. Myers

Advisory Editors: George E. Devlin, F. Kingsley Elder, Douglas A. Felch, Sinclair B. Ferguson, W. Robert Godfrey, Joseph H. Hall, Norman E. Harper, William B. Herrington, Glen C. Knecht, Joseph A. Pipa, Jr., Robert R. Rich, and William H. Smith

Session to Session

Wallace Memorial Presbyterian Church
7201 Sixteenth Place and Erskine Street
Hyattsville, MD 20783-4399

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■
■ NON-PROFIT ORG ■
■ U.S. POSTAGE ■
■ PAID ■
■ HYATTSVILLE, MD ■
■ PERMIT NO 95 ■
■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

PCA Historical Archives
Mrs W J Starnes
12330 Conway Road
St. Louis, MO
63141