

Session to Session

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The Assembly That Dared Say No

by O. Palmer Robertson

The seventeenth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America was "the Assembly that dared say no." By adopting this mood, the court indicated that the PCA is entering into a new stage.

All the pieces now are in place for the orderly operation of this young denomination, and the church must settle down for the large task ahead. The big battles are done, and shoulder must be set beside shoulder for the advancement of the gospel.

Now would be a good time for someone to propose a five-year moratorium on changes in the Book of Church Order. Let the church get used to the workable system that's in place. It may not be perfect, but it's clearly functional.

Look at the major issues to which this Assembly said "No:"

(1) It said no to the proposed BCO modification of the makeup of the Administrative Committee of the General Assembly, even though two-thirds of the presbyteries already had approved the change. During the discussion, it became clear that this administrative change would make effective previously proposed changes in the power of the stated clerk, giving him the title of "chief administrative officer" and making him responsible for carrying out program, policy and performance audits for all General Assembly committees and agencies.

(2) It said no to a proposal that would have changed the procedure for nomination of Covenant College and Seminary board members, despite the fact that eleven presbyteries had promoted this change. This action would have required that presbytery nominations be funneled through the boards of the institutions. A happy compromise was reached by allowing the college and seminary boards to communicate to the Assembly's nominating committee its recommendations concerning nominees of presbyteries.

(3) It said no to proposed changes in the BCO which would have made it even more explicit that gifts related to new revelation have ceased. The Assembly felt the present statement was clear enough in affirming this point.

(4) It said no to a proposed study committee on the gifts of prophecy and tongues, despite an offer by interested par-

ties to bear the costs. A study on this subject was adopted by the third general assembly.

(5) It said no to an effort to amend the BCO preamble which currently states that the civil government should promote liberty for all religions. The amendment attempted to specify religious liberty only for denominations of Christians.

(6) It said no to a BCO change that would have allowed ruling elders to be elected on an annual basis as moderators of sessions rather than designating the minister as the mod-

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Operation Rescue and the Bible

by Joseph A. Pipa

A number of months ago, when a group of pro-life protesters were arrested in Houston for chaining themselves to block entrance to an abortuary, some people known to our congregation were arrested. A number of our elders were very concerned about the activity and asked me to counsel our people who were involved in pro-life demonstrations to avoid civil disobedience. I agreed to communicate the elders' desire, but, frankly, I was ambivalent. I wondered if maybe the time had not come for more direct action. Perhaps this activity was necessary. Therefore I began to study and discuss the issue. Since that time I have had challenging discussions with many in our congregation as well as many others. Through the process of prayerfully discussing and studying the issue, I reached the conclusion that the elders were correct. I could find no Biblical warrant for what had come to be known as Operation Rescue. In this article I attempt to give a biblical examination of this issue. As I do so, keep certain things in mind. In the first place, let none of us forget that abortion is a heinous sin. It is murder. It is reprehensible in the sight of God and must be reprehensible to all God's people.

Second, let us approach this issue solely on the basis of the Bible. Frankly, as I have read, listened to the tapes, and discussed this issue I have been appalled by the lack of sound biblical thinking. More appalling, though, is the pragmatism that is used to undergird the activities of this movement. As I have voiced my reservations my questions were answered by pragmatic arguments. For example I was told,

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erator. The unique role of the minister as representing the presbytery on session was one reason given for retaining the present system.

(7) It said no to entering into a fraternal relationship with the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, despite the recommendation of the permanent committee on interchurch relations. The EPC has an "irrevocable" position favoring the ordination of women to the office of ruling and teaching elders, and "fraternal" relationship has been defined by the PCA as involving intercommunion and pulpit fellowship. Exchange of observers at general assemblies will continue. In the meantime, let us pray that the "irrevocable" will become "revocable."

(8) It said no to the adoption of a statement on "Guiding Principles for Ecumenical Relations" apart from first having face-to-face discussions about these principles with the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. The Assembly wanted to explore the possibility of mutually agreeable principles with the OPC before they were finally adopted.

(9) It said no to a motion to stop allowing all undesignated monies given to the General Assembly to go *The Messenger*. Contributions to the General Assembly not otherwise specified will continue to go to the denominational magazine rather than being distributed among the various committees.

(10) It said no to the title of "Executive Director" for the coordinator of the Mission to the World committee. Although the motion was denied on technical reasons, this title would modify the PCA concept that church government belongs in the hands of the church courts, not committees and administrations.

This series of "no" votes by the seventeenth Assembly does not mean that it did nothing positive. It received a bagpiped announcement of the opening of a new seminary in Coral Ridge, Florida by retiring moderator D. James Kennedy. It increased the number of PCA presbyteries, indicating the continuing blessing of the Lord on his church. It adopted for presbytery consideration a BCO change that will allow sessions to remove members from the church rolls by following the provisions of Matthew 18. It heard a report on the continuing problem of the AIDS epidemic, and urged the churches to consider adopting a policy for ministering in the present situation.

But the pattern of steady refusals to modify its present mode of operation generally prevailed, and may be interpreted as a positive sign. At seventeen years of age, the church is basically content with its order, and ready to move on in maturity.

The struggle over centralization of power will continue. During the next year it will center on the job description being proposed for the stated clerk, and his role in providing judicial advice to the church.

In it all, the Lord has blessed the PCA beyond measure. Let us give all glory to him. Let us be about his business of building up the body and reaching out to the world. Ω

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"since abortion is murder and this procedure works, we should adopt it." The end, however, doesn't justify the means. God does not approve of such reasoning. We are to try everything by the Bible. "To the law and the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn" (Isaiah 8:20).

Third, we must respect one another's right of conscience in this issue. I can honestly say that I have sought to listen to those with whom I disagree. I have allowed myself before God to be challenged by what they have to say. I trust that in my remarks you will find me fair and charitable. I simply ask for the same respect. Sadly, division is developing over this issue. We must not allow this to happen. We must be willing to let each man's conscience function under the lordship of Jesus Christ. We must be willing to disagree in love; each of us seeking to build on the foundation of the Bible.

In this article I will seek to do two things. First, briefly to review the philosophy and methodology of Operation Rescue and second, attempt a biblical critique of its philosophy and methodology.

Operation Rescue is a direct attempt to stop abortion by non-violent civil disobedience. This strategy is contrasted to the more indirect means used by the prolife movement up to this time: picketing, sidewalk counseling, operating crisis pregnancy centers, providing homes to unwed mothers and political lobbying. By non-violent direct intervention at abortion clinics, Operation Rescue is seeking to stop individual abortions and to change the laws of the land.

Before we discuss their strategy let us note the two philosophical foundations of the rescue movement. According to a tape and pamphlet by Randall Terry there are two principles. First, the church needs to repent for bowing the knee to Caesar and to make restitution for its guilty silence. The way the church makes restitution is by involvement in Operation Rescue.

The second principle, according to Mr. Terry, is that social upheaval is the most effective way to bring about political change. It is Mr. Terry's opinion that all change comes by revolution. He illustrates his point with the American Revolution, the abolitionist movement, the women's suffrage movement, the anti-Vietnam movement, and the civil rights movement. Thus the way for Christians to affect change in society and to effect change in the laws of the land is to cause social upheaval.

What then is the strategy based upon this philosophy? As I have already mentioned it is non-violent civil disobedience. They attempt to block access to abortion clinics by placing their bodies before driveways, sidewalks, doors or by chaining themselves in front of the entrance. As long as the demonstrators are there, women must wait or go elsewhere. Meanwhile others are seeking to do sidewalk counselling, challenging the women who can't get inside with the biblical alternative to abortion. Those blocking access to the building remain until at least some are arrested. They

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do not resist arrest, but, lying passively, force the police to carry them away. This drags out the procedure. Furthermore, at the police station they frequently give false names and identification in order to clog up the arrest procedure. By doing these things they temporarily shut down a clinic and divert the police and courts from dealing with more serious crimes. Moreover, they get greater media exposure, which they believe will awaken the consciences of more citizens against this terrible evil.

The proponents of rescue operations basically use four groups or passages of scripture as their scriptural warrant. The foundational text of the movement is Peter's remarks in Acts 5:29 and its parallel in Acts 4:19. We must obey God rather than men. From Peter's response we infer that when the laws of the land contradict the law of God we must disobey men in order to defend the laws of God.

The second passage is Psalm 82:1-4: "God takes his stand in his own congregation, he judges in the midst of the rulers, how long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked, vindicate the weak and fatherless, do justice to the afflicted and destitute, rescue the weak and needy, deliver them out of the hands of the wicked." Here is a command to vindicate the weak and fatherless, to do justice to the afflicted and to rescue the weak and deliver them. The proponents of Operation Rescue claim this as the mandate for their particular form of civil disobedience.

The third passage is Proverbs 24:11,12 "deliver those who are being taken away to death and those who are staggering to slaughter, O hold them back. If you say, see, we did not know this, does he not consider it who weighs the hearts and does he not know it who keeps your soul and not render to man according to his work." Again, the command is to deliver or rescue those that are being taken away to death. Furthermore, the feigned ignorance is no excuse.

The last reference is a group of passages in the law of God dealing with blood guiltiness. I will give two examples. Leviticus 20:1-5 (perhaps one of the most pertinent Old Testament passages in the whole area of abortion) "Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying you shall say to the sons of Israel any man from the sons of Israel or from the aliens sojourning in Israel gives any of his offspring to Molech shall surely be put to death, the people of the land shall stone him with stones. I will set my face against that man and will cut him off among his people because he has given some of his offspring to Molech so as to defile my sanctuary and to profane my holy name. If the people of the land, however, should ever disregard that man when he gives away any of his offspring to Molech, so as to not put him to death, then I myself shall set my face against that man and against his family and I will cut off among his people both him and those who play the harlot after him by playing the harlot after Molech."

The worship of Molech involved the offering of one's children to be burned. God abhorred this. He forbade it among his people. God said that one who did this should be

put to death. If he were not put to death both the person and those who condoned his actions would be under God's wrath.

Another appropriate passage is Numbers 35:29-34: "And these things shall be for statutory ordinance to you throughout your generation and all your dwellings. If anyone kills a person, the murderer shall be put to death at the evidence of witnesses; but no person shall be put to death on the testimony of one witness or you shall not take ransom for the life of a murderer who is guilty of death but he shall surely be put to death and you shall not take ransom for him who has fled to a city of refuge that he may return to live in the land before the death of a priest. So you shall not pollute the land in which you are, for blood pollutes the land and no expiation can be made for the land for the blood that is shed on it except by the blood of him who sheds it. And you shall not defile the land in which you live and in the midst of which I dwell for I, the Lord, am dwelling in the midst of the sons of Israel." In this passage God clearly teaches that the murderer is to be executed and when he isn't the land is defiled and under God's judgment.

From these passages Mr. Terry argues that because of our silence the blood of the innocent must be avenged. According to him, the way to remove the blood guilt from our country is to perform rescue operations. He insists that only by doing this will our land and churches be saved from the judgment of God. Blood guiltiness must be removed before we can expect God to bless our efforts to stop abortion.

I trust that I have been fair in this brief summary. If I haven't, it has been an honest effort on my part and I will gladly be corrected.

What then shall we say to these things? I have two serious objections. I believe that operation rescue is founded on an improper scriptural warrant and an unbiblical philosophical warrant. First, it is based on an improper scriptural warrant. Let us look more carefully at the scriptural passages reviewed above.

Of course the foundational passages are Acts 5:29 and Acts 4:19. We all agree that in these verses the Bible states a doctrine of civil disobedience. Note carefully, however, what is involved. We must disobey when the government tells us to do or not to do that which would involve us in a direct violation of the law of God. Clearly that was the case with the disciples. The command of the Sanhedrin directly contradicted the command of King Jesus who told his church to preach in his name. Thus, when the ecclesiastical authorities commanded the disciples to cease preaching in the name of Jesus the disciples would have been sinning to obey. Theirs was the only proper response, "we must obey God and not men." We may never obey men when it brings us in a direct violation with the law of God.

Every other example in the Scripture of civil disobedience is of the same nature. The Hebrew mid-wives were commanded to commit infanticide, they refused. Rehab was commanded to betray the spies that God had sent into

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the land, she refused. Daniel was told not to pray, he obeyed God and not men. His three Hebrew friends were told to bow down to the idol, they obeyed God and not men. Note this very important distinction. In each of these situations God's people disobey because they were commanded to violate God's law.

Even though some do not like it, this is an important distinction. Abortion laws do not require abortions. They are godless laws that permit murder but they require no one to perform an abortion nor a woman to seek an abortion. If our

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government were to require mandatory abortions for any family that had more than one child, then we would resist and tell the government we must obey God and not man. We would die before any government official took our wives to an abortion clinic. In our present situation the government does not require Christians to sin. Rather it allows non-Christians to kill their children. I can find no warrant in scripture for a civil disobedience against unrighteous laws that do not require us to commit unrighteous actions.

At this point, proponents of Operation Rescue ask "but what about Psalm 82? Aren't we commanded to deliver the needy, the weak, to rescue the helpless?" Yes but their application is erroneous. In Part II of this article, to be published in the next Session to Session, I'll explain why. Ω

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