

Session to Session

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

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A Vision for the Decade

by O. Palmer Robertson

This decade now opening ends the century. Like the last chapter of a book, it rounds out the exciting adventure of the past hundred years.

But this decade is even more spectacular. Not only does it round out the century; it completes a millennium. A thousand-year period of history climaxes in the next ten years.

What will this distinctive decade do for the church of Jesus Christ? What are the options, good or bad, that are before us?

First, let us with all our powers envision a **vibrant, growing church**. Growth is life, and a living church is a growing church. An essential characteristic of the apostolic church was the Lord's adding to the church daily those who were being saved (Acts 2:47). As Peter, Paul, Philip, and Steven traversed the earth, the gospel went forth not only in word but also in demonstration of the Spirit and of power.

But as tempting as it might appear, the vision for the coming decade must not center on growth in numbers for the sake of growth in numbers. The world's idea of success too easily invades the church and perverts its mission.

A recent letter from a respected and resourceful PCA missionary to France wrestles frankly and openly with disappointments that can be experienced in the growth of the church. Dr. Peter Jones first reviews reports he has heard of rapid church growth in southern California. 20,000 quick telephone calls easily net 3,000 new members. But in southern France, years of painstaking fidelity to evangelism through personal friendships, community involvement, and door-to-door work may fail to yield a single convert.

Shall we recall our missionary? Shall we say he has failed for not producing a rapidly growing church?

Or shall we remember that God alone is Lord of the harvest, and that faithfulness to the gospel is a more important criterion than numbers tallied by men? Other prophets contemporary to Jeremiah had a much larger following. But Jeremiah was counted faithful even though his ministry was received by only a few and even though he himself finally was carried into captivity along with a people that would not hear his word.

The false expectation that leads a church to do almost

anything to add impressive numbers to the rolls of churches, ministers and members has many pitfalls. Like a business that expands too fast, the church that adds indiscriminately one day will pay the price for its passion for pure numbers.

Yes, we want to grow. We plead with the Lord to add to the church daily those being saved. We command men everywhere to repent and believe in Christ. We commit ourselves to planting new churches as rapidly as possible, and to ordaining elders in every town, city, and suburb.

But a vision for growth in numbers must be paralleled with a vision for growth in spiritual maturity. We must

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A Life with Missions: A Memoir

by Peg the Aged

Born in 1905 of a missionary-minded mother who had hoped to go Africa, but was discouraged by her pastor on the grounds of her frailty (she lived to be 92!), I became aware of people called "heathen" who needed to hear about Jesus before I had lost my baby teeth.

Now let's jump from '05 to about '37 when I, prodigal that I was, turned up at home broken in health, marriage soon to end in divorce, finally willing to seek help from someone my mother called God.

"Mom," I said, "if this thing called Christianity is working anywhere it must be on the foreign field. I don't see it around Richmond, not where I go anyway. Got any books that might help?"

She had books, and she had books! I first read a short one, biographical sketches of women missionaries sent out by the Foreign Mission Board of the Presbyterian Church, U.S., sent and financially supported by the Board. The book was titled *Glorious Living*, and I found it incredible that women as intelligent as those gals believed the Bible. They really believed it! And they did live gloriously—something I had sought and missed.

But the real zinger that got me was the the two unabridged volumes of *The Life of Hudson Taylor*, the Englishman who founded the China Inland Mission (now the Overseas Missionary Fellowship) in 1865 or thereabouts. I devoured those two volumes, riveted to my seat. Jeremiah-like, I found the Book and I did eat it, and my soul delighted in it. Taylor believed the Bible also, but more remarkable

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avoid laying hands on any man too quickly. We must try the various spirits to see that they be of God. Our hope for the decade must envision a healthy church that glorifies God by its growing maturity in the faith as well as its growth in numbers.

Secondly, our hope for the decade must envision a **church that concentrates on its central task**, which is the preaching of the gospel.

The church is not the only way that God works in the world. God works through Christian politicians, through Christian artists, through Christian businessmen, judges, and educators. But the church as the church must not attempt to take to itself all the various tasks performed by Christians in the world.

No other organization has the authority from God to proclaim his word. No other organization can ordain elders and deacons in every city, administer the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and bring under the healing influences of spiritual discipline a person that strays from the truth by word or by deed. If the church does not do these things, no one else will. Contrariwise, if the church tries through its own limited structures to do everything that ought to be done in the name of the Lord, it will dissipate its energies and lose its force at the very point where it can have the greatest effect.

Let the church be the church, and let its membership also do the many other things that will give glory to God in our generation. Let us by all means avoid tangents that will only taint our reputation in the world.

This past decade, the evangelical community had its fingers burned badly. Evangelical spokesmen took a quick trip to central America, and then told the politicians what they ought to do. One leading evangelical received an early morning telephone call from the Prime Minister of Israel, and promptly informed the President of the United States what his Near Eastern policy ought to be.

Is it not plain that a backlash has begun that could seriously damage the rights and destroy the opportunities for evangelicals in this country? Let us praise God for every politician who manifests Christian convictions. But let us remember that the church must retain its unique role in the world, rigidly avoiding all tempting tangents if it is going to realize its greatest potential.

Thirdly, our vision must include a **church that understands the sanctifying character of doctrinal truth**.

It is relatively easy in a confessional church to agree with doctrinal standards as a collection of theoretical statements. But then the tendency is to "move on" to the "more practical matters" that make for a "vital" church.

But Jesus said, "Thy Word is truth. Sanctify them in truth" (John 17:17). Truth sanctifies. Wholeness in doctrine will mean wholeness in life. There is not a truth of the word of God as embodied in the doctrinal statements of the church that does not have sanctifying significance for the health and well-being of the people of God. Right doctrine

transforms the life. As Calvin has said so well:

Doctrine is not an affair of the tongue, but of the life: is not apprehended by the intellect and memory merely, like other branches of learning; but is received only when it possesses the whole soul, and finds its seat and habitation in the innermost recesses of the heart. (*Institutes*, III, vi, 4)

Calvin's symbol of a burning heart extended toward God, and his slogan of the heart "promptly and sincerely" given to God, display a proper understanding of the vital effect of truth in life.

In contrast with a commitment to wholeness in doctrine is the spirit of latitudinarianism.

What is "latitudinarianism?" It is a spirit that wants lots of "latitude." Broad churchism wants to include as many views within the church as possible, without looking too closely at doctrinal commitments.

But latitudinarianism inevitably leads the church to lose its God-given distinctives. The church then becomes like salt that has lost its preserving power, and like light that has lost its penetrating power.

Jonathan Edwards, by any standard one of the greatest intellects that has arisen in the history of this land, suffered as a result of the church's latitudinarianism. It seems that Jonathan Edwards's father-in-law, who had preceded him as pastor of the same church, thought everyone should be included in the invitation to the Lord's table. He saw communion as an evangelistic tool by which the sinner might confront the gospel of God's grace and be saved.

When Jonathan Edwards attempted to restrict access to the Lord's table only to Christians, he was voted out of his church, he was denied access to a common plot of ground for raising his crops, and he along with his expectant wife were urged out of town. After years of brilliant and devoted service to his congregation in New England, he was asked to leave because he felt that a person needed first to make a credible profession of faith before sharing in the privileges of communion.

Latitudinarianism eventually destroys the distinction between the church and the world. It cuts the core out of the discipline of the church, since in the end anyone can have access to the most intimate fellowship of the church without having his faith properly tested by the church.

There is a better way. It is the way of fully appreciating the sanctifying character of doctrinal truth. It is the way of seeing all the truth of God as a means of creating a distinctive people that will glorify the God who saves from sin's guilt and power. A holy people sanctified by the truth in all its richness will attract the world to a way of life they do not otherwise possess.

Let us envision for this last decade of the century a church that knows the truth, understands the value of truth, and is sanctified by the truth. Let us "hold fast the doctrine," so that lives may be graciously transformed.

So what is our vision of the decade?

Our vision is simply this: **Let the church be the church.** Let the church of Jesus Christ be what it ought to be in the purpose and plan of God. If the church will content itself with its ever-challenging calling of being the church in the world, it will find itself so taken up in its principal task that it will not have time for empty gestures that have no meaning in the lasting purposes of God.

The impact will be immeasurable. The world will never be the same. Ω

Rhetoric and Reality: What Does "Choice" Mean?

by D. G. Hart

Since the Supreme Court's *Webster* decision, the prolife position has become the subject of much ridicule. If human life really starts at conception and if fetuses, accordingly, are persons, some prochoicers sneer, then why don't parents name their fetuses before birth and celebrate their children's birthdays (despite the self-evident meaning of the term) on the date of conception?

A good example of this kind of parodying of the prolife position was found in an article by William Saletan entitled, "If Fetuses are People . . ." (*The New Republic*, 28 August 1989). Saletan reports on a number of "guerilla lawyers," mainly from Missouri, who are taking the fetal-rights position to its *reductio ad absurdum* limits. For example, one Kansas City lawyer is suing Missouri's attorney general for jailing the fetus of a female prison inmate without due process. In another case, using the logic that people should have nine months added to their ages if fetuses are people, a lawyer argued that his 20-year-and-5-month-old client, who was stripped of his license for driving while intoxicated, was legally 21 years old and should be immune to the penalty of automatic licence suspension. Lawyers are threatening to make similar arguments about eligibility for Social Security.

Of course, the prochoice position is equally susceptible to parody (I will leave it to crafty prolife lawyers to concoct the specific legislation and identify the appropriate test cases). The prochoice position rests on a fairly simple and naive argument. Its simplicity stems from its defense of personal liberty. The decision either to abort or to bring a pregnancy to term should be left to the family (or mother, if a feminist is making the argument); the government, on the other hand, has no right to interfere in this decision. The matter of pregnancy is so private and personal, in fact, according to prochoicers, that it deserves to be protected by the constitution. The naïveté of the prochoice position derives from its failure to recognize that government does often interfere in the personal choices of individuals and that

much of the liberal agenda is predicted upon government regulations of private affairs. Indeed, many of the liberals who are prochoice also support programs which increase the size of government and its ability to affect the lives of citizens. Here is where the parody begins.

If they are really serious about personal freedoms, so-called "prochoicers" should also be defending the pornographer's right to free speech, the NRA member's right to own a hand gun, David Letterman's right to drive 80 miles an hour in Connecticut (after all, he no longer drinks and has not had an accident), Pete Rose's right to gamble, and the business executive's right to take home all of his or her paycheck?

Though smoking tobacco is offensive these days primarily because of its effects upon the public, private use is also being restricted by the logic of health insurance. Especially in the case of police and fire departments, taxpayers are increasingly unwilling to pay for the health benefits of civil servants who continue to smoke and overeat. Thus one of the primary liberal concerns, a national program of health insurance, has consequences for what used to be merely matters of private preference. Of course, some of these issues may seem like absurd implications of the prochoice position. But that is exactly the point. If you are going to defend a particular position, not because it is virtuous or necessary, but rather because the government doesn't have a right to interfere, then you have to think about what the defense means for the array of laws which prohibit all sorts of actions, many of which are personal and do not directly affect society.

Finally the prochoice position fails to square with the daily examples of state interference in family matters. Indeed, one of the most significant realities of life in the late twentieth century is one that many rarely consider: public schooling. If prochoicers are genuine about letting parents decide about family matters, why aren't they concerned about the coercive role of the government in public schools? Millions of children are sent to school each day to be educated by the state and if parents want to educate their children themselves, they need the state's approval. Meanwhile, parents do not have the power to decide that their children should work or play instead of going to school. As J. Gresham Machen told the Senate Committee on Education and Labor in 1926, "If you give the bureaucrats the children, you might just as well give them everything else." If this example of state interference sounds too cranky, how about the recent Florida case where parents who, because of their Christian Science beliefs, did not provide proper medical treatment for their diabetic child, were tried for the child's subsequent death and convicted of manslaughter? No prochoice leaders reacted indignantly to government's interference in this very private and delicate matter, and one which seems straightforwardly to be protected by the free exercise clause of the First Amendment.

At root, the advocates of "choice" are more concerned

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with protecting access to abortion than they are with preserving personal liberty per se. The prochoice rhetoric is a hollow and dishonest exploitation of the language of liberty. It would be more fitting if their position were phrased in the vernacular of convenience. Ω

D.G. Hart is a graduate of Westminster Theological Seminary, and is currently the director of the Center for the Study of American Evcangelicalism at Wheaton College.

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A Life with Missions, continued from page 1

than that, he put it to the acid test: the CIM never authorized the solicitation of funds from anyone but God. The mission looked to God and the funds came in. Here indisputably I saw faith and the faithfulness of the God of the Bible demonstrated.

As I laid aside the second volume I knew—and I have never doubted since—I was Christ's and Christ was mine! The Spirit of the living God had wooed and won me.

A year or so later a cab driver said to me: "You ought to be a missionary." My reply: "I am!" Ω

Readers may recognize the name and the voice of "Peg the d," a.k.a. Margaret W. McLester, as a frequent contributor to The Presbyterian Journal. This is the first in a series that she has prepared on the Great Commission.

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