

Session to Session

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

SPECIAL 1991 P.C.A. GENERAL ASSEMBLY ISSUE

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Issues before the Assembly

Above all else, the issue before this Assembly is whether or not the General Assembly will continue to be effectively governed by representatives of presbyteries and sessions in true presbyterian fashion, or whether the direction of the denomination will be changed so that it will be governed by super-elders at the "top." As is often the case when a "spirit is blowing in the wind," this matter will be addressed from several perspectives. But the issue is the same: Shall the PCA practice what it professes when it says it believes presbyterianism is the biblical form of church government, or shall it "go pragmatic," which is another way of saying it will follow the wisdom of the world for the cause of efficiency?

Consider these various ways in which this issue will come before the 1991 Assembly:

(1) On the first day, when everyone still is jovially greeting one another, the Assembly will be asked to vote "yes" to make past moderators of the GA perpetual members of all future assemblies. They have been honored by their previous choice, they have the advantage of knowing how the assembly operates from the inside, and so, it will be argued, they should be given the privilege to speak and vote in all assemblies for the years to come.

Does anyone dare speak against the accumulated honor and reputation of all our past moderators?

No, no one dares.

No one, that is, except scripture, tradition, presbyterianism, Robert's Rules, and common sense.

Scripture knows nothing of super-elders who are set above other elders in their authority to exercise rule. While our past moderators have served us well, their service does not automatically make them super-elders, set in a category different from all other chosen representatives of the General Assembly.

Tradition has allowed past moderators to have the privilege of the floor, but it knows nothing of giving them the right to speak and vote on every issue the church will face in the future. Contrary to the statement in the *Commissioner's Handbook*, page 303, it has *not* been the practice from the inception of the PCA that former moderators have been honored by being given the privilege of voting at all subsequent assemblies.

Presbyterianism insists that higher courts be made up of people representing lower courts, not people representing the higher court itself. As the General Assembly presently is constituted, all teaching elders represent their presbyteries, and ruling elders represent their sessions (BCO 14-2). But which lower court would be represented by past moderators? This principle would become even more significant if the PCA ever decided to have a delegated assembly that restricted the number of representatives that presbyteries could send.

Robert's Rules says that the moderator of a large assembly "should never be chosen for any reason except his ability to preside" (1951, p. 241); but to attach perpetual privileges to the choice of a moderator seriously contradicts this principle.

Common sense will recognize the inevitable encouragement that this change would give to pre-assembly caucuses and "politics" already too much with us.

It's not a good thing. Let's keep the moderatorship of the General Assembly a non-political position for the sake of the long-term peace and purity of the church.

(2) For the third time the effort is being made to weaken the power of review and control belonging to the representatives of presbyteries and sessions at the General Assembly.

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The Divine Court's Decision about Abortion

by O. Palmer Robertson

The Supreme Court of this land rendered a new decision about abortion in 1989. *Roe v. Wade* was supplemented by *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services*. This landmark decision threw the highly controversial subject of abortion into the realm of the state legislatures of the country. With the raw wind of political pressure blowing from both sides, the legislators of the various states must decide to face one way or the other, or to forge some kind of compromise. In one particular state, recent legislation is rather alarming from a Christian's perspective.

This issue is not like most political questions that bring tensions to a nation. It is not a decision about how much should be spent on a particular military weapon, or what percentage of our natural forests should be sold to private

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Issues before the Assembly, continued from page 1

In the name of efficiency it is being proposed that the recommendations of the permanent committees come directly to the floor of the Assembly, without the modifications of the committees of commissioners. The suggestions of the committees of commissioners from presbyteries and sessions would come subsequently. Finally, *if allowed*, minorities would be permitted to speak.

Why the change? For efficiency in the use of the Assembly's time, it is stated.

Perhaps it will be more efficient for a while. But experience makes it plain that a deliberative body cannot do the work of a committee. Eventually commissioners will realize that they will have to hammer out issues on the floor of the Assembly that should have been resolved in committee. The only alternative to this painful procedure of doing committee work on the floor of the General Assembly would be for elders who have concerns about the business of the permanent committees to stay home or stay quiet.

It's presbyterian through and through for the representatives of sessions and presbyteries to review the work of the permanent committees. It's worked well for eighteen years. It provides a good vent for opinions other than those originating at "headquarters" to be heard. Let's keep it the way it is.

(3) A proposal is being introduced that clearly will limit freedom of expression for those who find themselves in a minority on an issue.

You know the sentiment that often gives rise to this kind of proposal: "It's that same old troublesome minority! They're at it again. Why should they be allowed to take up so much valuable time at the Assembly every year?"

We all harbor this kind of resentment toward that inconsiderate, troublesome, minority—until the time comes for *us* to be in the minority! And remember: Caleb and Joshua were in the minority. Their views were effectively suppressed by the howls of the majority. Stephen was in the minority, as was "Athanasius against the world." And then there was lonely Luther. And don't forget Machen, who was not allowed even the privilege of speaking in his own defense as he was being tried for disloyalty to the church. Some of us can still remember what it feels like to be in the minority by our experience in the old denomination, where we were guffawed when we were not gagged. Others of us seem to have forgotten.

Now here's the proposal for the PCA.

Change the treatment of minorities so that they can open their mouths and speak to the Assembly *only if by vote without debate the Assembly first allows them to report their opinions*. This restriction of minorities is supported by an appeal to Robert's Rules (*Commissioner's Handbook*, pp. 309, 310). It's a peculiar appeal because the section cited from Robert's Rules is arranged so that it joins portions of two paragraphs, and omits a section that describes the proper procedure for handling the report of a minority. The result is a recommendation to change our current procedures, which are in accord with Robert's Rules, to a new

procedure that actually is quite different.

The section of Robert's Rules that belongs between the two quoted sections at the top of page 310 in the *Handbook* reads as follows:

When the minority of a committee wishes to make a formal presentation of its views, it is customary, unless the assembly refuses permission, to receive its report immediately after the report of the committee. In such a case, the member presenting the committee report can properly notify the assembly that the minority wishes to submit its views in a separate report. As soon as the chair has stated the appropriate question of the committee report, *he should call for the minority presentation unless someone objects*, in which case he should put the question on the report's being received. A majority vote is required to receive a minority report; the question is undebatable. (Robert's Rules, 1990 edition, p. 520).

The difference between our old way and the new proposal is quite dramatic. In the case of our current practice, and according to the statement just cited from Robert's Rules, a minority of a committee is automatically granted the courtesy of presenting its report *unless someone objects*. It is assumed that all members of the court, and especially members of a committee will have something worth saying and so will be granted the courtesy of being heard. But the new procedure now being recommended operates on exactly the opposite premise. By this new proposal, a minority in each case will have to be granted the privilege of presenting its report by a vote of the Assembly, without any discussion that might explain the reasons for the report.

Gag rules in a deliberative assembly never work. Expressions of opinion that are suppressed in one place inevitably will pop up in another. It would be far better to have a group representing a minority that has had the opportunity to discuss its views offer a written report to the Assembly than to have individuals offer their various motions from the floor.

It can be hoped that the Assembly will not pass the proposed amendments to Section 17-2 of the Rules of Assembly Operation, or any of these proposed changes. If we *profess* to be biblically presbyterian, then let us *be* and *continue* to be presbyterian. Ω

Calvin on Church Authority

"Now we must speak of the order by which the Lord willed his church to be governed. He alone should rule and reign in the church as well as have authority or pre-eminence in it, and this authority should be exercised and administered by his Word alone. Nevertheless, because he does not dwell among us in visible presence [Matt. 26:11], we have said that he uses the ministry of men to declare openly his will to us by mouth, as a sort of delegated work, not by transferring to them his right and honor, but only that through their mouths he may do his own work—just as a workman uses a tool to do his work."

—*Institutes*, IV, iii, 1 (Battles Translation)

Divine Court's Decision, continued from page 1

enterprise. This issue is distinctive in that it has significant consequences for the moral fiber of the country. It calls Christians to a point of great concern because the Bible teaches very clearly a position on this particular issue. While earthly courts and legislatures may offer their opinions, a divine court in heaven already has rendered its decision.

The Decision About Human Life

In one sense this whole controversy might be understood as a custody question. Whose child is the unborn infant? Is it God's child or is it man's child? Is it the woman's child or is it Satan's child? To whom does the unborn infant belong?

Remember the initial test of Solomon's wisdom? The District of Columbia was not the first national capital that had a prostitute problem. It seems that prostitutes were active in the ancient city of Jerusalem during the days of King Solomon (I Kings 3:16-28). Two of these prostitutes were living in the same house. Both of these women had babies within three days of one another. During the night one of the mothers rolled on her child and smothered it to death. In the darkness of the night she took the still, cold corpse of her own infant and substituted it for the living baby belonging to the other woman.

In the morning, the actual mother of the living child was horrified to discover the still body of an infant lying beside her. But as she examined the child in the way that only a mother can do, she saw clearly that this infant could not be her own. When confronted, the actual mother of the dead child refused to acknowledge that she had made a switch. Eventually the case was brought before young King Solomon. It was a puzzling problem, since each woman refused to relinquish her claim on the living child. After pondering the matter, Solomon offered his solution. "Bring a sword," he said. "Put the baby on the table, and divide it in two so that each mother can have a half."

The first woman frantically exclaimed, "Wait! Let her have the child; but in any case, let it live." But the second woman replied, "No! Let the child die. Let it belong to neither of us."

Then Solomon gave his ruling. The child must belong to the first woman, since she loved it the most and wanted it to live.

Whose child is the unborn infant? Is it God's child or man's child? Is it the woman's child or is it the Devil's child? The unborn infant belongs to the person who loves it the most and wants it to live.

The question is much like the query of the man who asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor," wanting to justify himself (Luke 10:29). The unforgettable answer of Jesus is embodied in the parable of the good Samaritan. Your neighbor is the person you love, the person for whom you are willing to sacrifice that he might live.

In the Bible, Satan is characterized principally by two activities: lying and murder. He begins with lying and he ends with murder. You can see it in the original temptation of

man. First he lied to Adam and Eve, telling them that they would not die if they ate the forbidden fruit. But all along he intended for them to die. He is the father of lies, and he was a murderer from the beginning. Lying begins the practice of Satan, and murder ends his practice.

You can see Satan's hand in the abortion dispute. He begins with a lie and he ends with death. The fetus is not a human being, he says. All along his intent is to have the infant put to death.

The first case of the Devil's determination to destroy the unborn infant is seen very vividly as Israel comes out of Egypt. They face Amalek, a direct descendent of Esau and a bitter enemy of the people of God. Amalek with his strong soldiers does not launch an attack against the warriors of Israel. He waits for the old men and the pregnant women staggering at the rear. Taking advantage of their defenselessness, he commands his soldiers to cut out the unborn children with their swords and to slaughter them. By this cruel act of brutality he intended to destroy the future seed of God. The age-old struggle between the seed of the woman and the seed of Satan was manifesting itself once more.

The second instance of Satan's determination to destroy the unborn seed of God is found in the book of Amos. The prophet declares:

"This is what the Lord says, 'For three sins of Ammon, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. Because he ripped open the pregnant women of Gilead in order to extend his borders. . .'" (Amos 1:13).

Once again the instrument of Satan shows his true colors. He mercilessly slits open the wombs of pregnant women and slaughters their unborn infants.

Why? What is the motivation for this horrible act?

The prophet Amos gives the true explanation. The Ammonites destroy the unborn children of the Gileadites because they want to extend their borders. They want more territorial possessions for themselves.

The same motivation works today. Satan tantalizes people with the same promise of more material possessions. Destroy the unborn infant for the sake of material gain. Since you cannot afford to support another child, snuff out its life before it is born.

The third instance of Satan's efforts to wipe out the infant seed of God is seen in the attack of Herod on the babies of Bethlehem. Herod as the tool of Satan begins with a lie. He tells the Magi, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him" (Matt. 2:8). The king pretends that he delights in the arrival of the promised Christ-child. But all along he is fiercely jealous.

He begins with a lie and ends with murder. He will not have a rival to his own purposes. He will murder all the infants of Bethlehem if necessary to destroy the one that would challenge his own authority.

Satan's determination is to destroy life. He continually moves from lying to murder. He is the father of all lies and

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he was a murderer from the beginning.

But God also contends for the children in this contest of custody. He wants children to live. He has a purpose for infants. God's commitment toward unborn children is seen repeatedly in scripture. Of Samson God says: "The boy is to be a Nazirite, set apart to God from the womb" (Judg. 13:5). The same point is repeated for emphasis: "The boy will be a Nazirite devoted to God from the womb until the day of his death" (Judg. 13:7). When the New International Version translates the phrase to read "from birth" instead of "from the womb," it is departing from the basic meaning of the word. In the context of the Lord's message to Samson's mother, it could not mean "From the point of issuance from the womb he shall be a Nazirite." For Samson's mother is told not to drink any fermented wine during her pregnancy (Judg. 13:14). While in the womb, the infant is to have no alcohol in its veins, in accordance with the commitments of the Nazirite. For God already has determined that he will be the instrument of deliverance for Israel.

God called young Jeremiah to be his prophet. But Jeremiah was hesitant to take on the responsibility. The Lord responded to this reticence by revealing to the prophet the origins of his purposes: "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you. Before you were born I set you apart. I appointed you as a prophet to the nations." (Jer. 1:4). Jeremiah had been set apart even before he had been formed in the womb by the special purposes of God.

In his prophecies about the messianic servant of the Lord, Isaiah says: "Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant nations: from the womb the Lord called me; from the bowels of my mother he has made mention of my name. . . . And now the Lord says, he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him." (Isa. 49:1,5). The servant of the Lord was formed and shaped while still in his mother's womb so that he could fulfil the purposes of God.

Of John the Baptist it was announced that he would be filed with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb (Lk. 1:15). When Mary came to visit Elizabeth, the child leaped for joy in his mother's womb (Lk. 1:44). In a similar way Paul says of himself: "God set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace" (Gal. 1:15).

Over and over it is stated that God has large plans for his servants while they are still in their mother's womb. But at what stage does God make these large plans? Is it during the first, the second, or the third trimester? The question is irrelevant, for we know that before the foundation of the world God determined his purposes for his people. God is the author of life. His purposes are for fullness of life.

But it is not just in the cases of his extraordinary servants that the Lord makes these plans for people yet to be born. It may be said of each and every servant of the Lord that he is formed distinctly by God while he is in his mother's womb. See what the psalmist says:

"You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and

wonderfully made. . . . My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be" (Ps. 139: 13-16).

How wondrous it is to think of the purposes of God at work as he forms and shapes the inmost parts of every human being while they still are in their mother's womb. God is the wonderful, the great creator of life. He stands in sharpest contrast with Satan the author of death. The divine court has rendered its decision, and it is in favor of life rather than death.

The Interest in Human Life

The recent decision of the Supreme Court includes one phrase that is repeated several times by more than one of the judges. The new decision speaks of "the state's interest in potential human life." It is a very significant phrase. Basically it is a good phrase. Of course, the little infant in the mother's womb does not represent merely potential human life; it *is* human life. But the fact that the state acknowledges its interest in "potential human life" is very significant.

Does the state have an interest in potential human life? Does the government have a right and a reason to protect potential human life? Indeed it does. As Proverbs 14:28 states, "A large population is the king's glory, but without subjects a prince is ruined." If there are no citizens, there is no state. People are the greatest asset the state possesses. A monarchy would be ruined if it had no subjects.

A popular children's book depicts a king on the throne of a distant planet. He has great power that enables him to command whatever he wishes. But he has one problem. No one else lives on the planet who might obey him.

If a king has an interest in the potential human life of his domain, how much more does a democracy have an interest in the potential human life of its country! "We the People" defines the very essence of this nation. The minds, the bodies, the souls of the citizens are the state. Much more significant than the state's obligation to guard its natural resources is its responsibility to protect its human resources.

Now if the state has an interest in potential human life, how much more does God have interest in potential human life. As a matter of fact, scripture affirms that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit each have their own particular interest in potential human life.

Infants are chosen by the Father. Even before they are conceived, God the Father sets his eternal love on them. The Westminster Confession of Faith speaks of elect infants who die in infancy. Some reformed theologians have concluded that all infants who die in infancy are elect infants, chosen by the Father to possess eternal salvation. It is quite possible that all infants who die in infancy are the special objects of the redeeming love of God. But at the least it can be affirmed that some aborted babies are the special objects of

God's love. As aborted babies, they stand in the line of Stephen, of Peter and of others who have given their life to the glory of God. They are as Christian martyrs, suffering the abuses of an evil world even though they are chosen of the Father. God is their Father and God has a special interest in them.

These infants who belong to God are redeemed by the precious blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. He shed his blood for infants that they might be redeemed from death. What worth lives must have in the eyes of Jesus if he was willing to give up his life so that they might not die.

Objects of art that display beauty, originality, and creative ability have become very valuable in an affluent society. Several million dollars recently were paid for a single Van Gogh painting. But no one has yet stepped forward to give his life for a piece of artwork.

But our Lord Jesus Christ so valued the unborn infants that he was willing to pour out his life for them. Of far more worth than the most glorious work of art is the smallest, seemingly least significant of human lives.

These infants also are filled by the Holy Spirit. It would not be true of all infants, but it is true of some. They have been filled by the Holy Spirit even before they were born. John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Spirit while still in his mother's womb (Lk. 1:15). He bore the fruit of the Spirit in his joy before being born as a result of the working of the Spirit in his heart (Lk. 1:44).

All elect infants who die in infancy must have been born again of the Holy Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit must live in them. And "do you not know," says the apostle Paul, "that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit?" (I Cor. 6:19). Whoever therefore defiles the body, defiles the temple of God. And he who defiles the temple of God, God shall judge.

Yes, the state has an interest in potential human life. But how much greater is the interest of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in infants yet unborn.

How should Christians respond in the present circumstance? What should you do in light of the Divine Court's decision about abortion? What should you do about the Supreme court's decision about abortion? Consider some things that you should do and some things that you should not do.

First of all, don't do nothing.

God's word says: "Rescue those being led away to death; hold back those staggering towards slaughter. If you say, 'But we knew nothing about this,' does not he who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not he who guards your life know it? Will he not repay each person according to what he has done?" (Prov. 24:11, 12).

When you see infants being led away to death, staggering to slaughter, don't do nothing. You should not try to do *everything* that might be done in this area. But you are to do something. The state has a special responsibility to use its force in restraining evil and guarding the life of its citizenry. As an individual you should not presume to take over the re-

sponsibilities of the state in this area. But you are to do all you can as a citizen to rescue those staggering to slaughter.

Secondly, pray. Exalt the role of the God who answers prayer in this matter. The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, says the scripture. He turns it like the watercourses wherever he will (Prov. 21:1). A few judges and legislators will make decisions. What is the basis on which they will decide? Ultimately the thing that is in their hearts will make them decide. Pray that God will influence the hearts of the judges and the legislators of this land.

Repeatedly the response of Christians to martyrdom has been the same. As Stephen was being martyred, he lifted his eyes to heaven. When Herod arrested Peter after killing James the brother of John the church assembled to pray. When Paul writes from prison, not knowing whether he would live or die, he urges that they pray for him. When the Lord faced martyrdom, He asked the disciples to pray with him. Not Peter's sword but prayer was the way to deal with the threat to his life.

In the decisiveness of this moment, it is essential that we pray. Pray individually. Pray corporately. Pray with persistence and earnestness. If you pray the circumstances will not be the same as they would have been otherwise. God will get the glory whatever happens if his people are praying.

Thirdly, don't disobey the just laws of this land. Do not be known as an evildoer.

In the New Testament times two responses were registered against oppressive Roman rule. The people of Qumran withdrew from the whole of the society and formed a colony that waited for God. The Maccabees drew the sword and attempted to establish righteousness in the land by force.

Neither of these responses is commended by scripture. Don't withdraw totally from society, and don't be known as an evildoer by disobeying the just laws of the land.

Fourthly and finally, exercise fully your responsibilities as a Christian steward and a Christian citizen of this land. As a steward, give above and beyond your tithes and offerings to support those organizations that are advancing the cause of restraining the evils associated with abortion. As a citizen, make your views known. With a genuine sense of responsibility to the community in which you live, make your views known. You are in a unique circumstance of being governor as well as governed in this land. Use the governing powers that are yours in response to the present circumstance.

The Divine Court has made its decision. Its decision in the end will prove to be correct. God's decision is for life and not for death.

Let us as citizens of the kingdom of God act in wisdom as people who understand the times in which we live. Let us respond in obedience and faith to the responsibility entrusted to us as Christian witnesses in the world. Ω

Dr. Robertson's essay on "Tongues Today?" the first two parts of which appeared in the past two issues of Session to Session, will be continued in the next issue.

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Notes from the Managing Editor

The editors would appreciate receiving suggestions for topics for future articles in *Session to Session*. We are in the process of making long-range editorial plans, and are particularly interested in knowing what sorts of articles would be useful to ruling elders.

The greatest expense in most publications is marketing: getting the word to potentially interested readers. If you would be interested in helping us get the word out about *Session to Session*, please let us know. We need your help.

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Other Voices

"When the Reformers spoke of an 'invisible' Church, they did not mean to suggest that Christianity is a purely private religion. On the contrary, they insisted that the preaching of the Word and administration of the sacraments—both public acts—were essential marks of the Church. For the Reformers, the 'face' of the Church was publicly unveiled not primarily in political action or even in 'little platoons' of Christians involved in ministry, but in the gathering of the Word and the celebration of the Eucharist. Though the Reformers were hardly apolitical, they knew that the Church has been given a public task that transcends politics."

—Peter J. Leithart, in *First Things*, May 1991

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