

Session to Session

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SPECIAL 1992 PCA GENERAL ASSEMBLY ISSUE

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The Vision Thing

by William H. Smith

George Bush is frequently criticized about "the vision thing." He is compared unfavorably with Ronald Reagan, who, if weak on details, had a clear idea of what he wanted the country to be. Bush, it is said, is a nice guy and strong on details, but he lacks vision.

After last year's meeting of the General Assembly, it may appear that the PCA, despite its "Vision 2000" statement, is weak on "the vision thing." Too much of the Assembly was taken up with wrangling over administrative matters—over the fine points of *The Book of Church Order*, the details of the *Rules of Assembly Operation*, the technicalities of *Robert's Rules of Order*. Is the PCA lacking a clear vision of what it wants to be? Perhaps. That is why it is important to clarify our vision for the Church. What kind of Church do we want?

We envision the PCA as *a church with a hearty and healthy commitment to the Reformed faith*. Such a commitment involves several things: (1) It is a commitment to the catholic faith, the faith of the universal Church expressed in the historic creeds of the Christian faith. We want a church with a sense of history and of universality which can, with understanding and manly voice, confess its faith without reservations using the Apostles' Creed or Nicene Creed or Athanasian Creed. (2) It is a commitment also to the evangelical faith. We want a church which proclaims winsomely and without apology to the modern world the truths of sin, of Christ, of grace, of salvation, of faith and repentance from a Bible it believes is the true and inerrant Word of God. (3) It is a commitment to the Westminster faith, the faith so fully and accurately summarized in our *Confession of Faith*. We want a church which has experienced the power of such truths as the majesty of God, the sovereignty of grace, and the unity of the Covenants, enlightening the mind, warming the heart, energizing the will. We want a church which affirms the *Westminster Confession* to be the confession of its own living faith. We want a church which does not compartmentalize faith and practice, doctrine and worship, truth and ministry but a church which self-consciously and joyfully integrates the Reformed faith with its whole life.

We envision the PCA as *a church with confidence in*

Presbyterian government as both Biblical and practical.

One thing which frustrates many about General Assembly is that it seems too often to have so little relation to the gathering of the Apostles and elders described in Acts. 15, which we take as the justification and model for the General Assembly. The Jerusalem Assembly spent its time discussing and deciding matters of theology, missions, and church unity. The result of that meeting was that the churches were encouraged. What PCA elder would not find it refreshing to attend an Acts 15 Assembly?

But what *is* a church committed to and confident in Presbyterianism? (1) It is a church with a high view of the visible Church as the institution Christ himself has established and "given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints." (*WCF, XXV:III*) For that very reason we want a church which will be aggressive in evangelism, missions, church planting, and discipling. (2) It is a church which recognizes Christ as its sole Head of the Church who expresses His will in the Scriptures. It is for that reason a church which gives careful attention and submission to the Scriptures as it organizes itself, teaches, worships, and carries out its mission. (3) It is a church in which Christ rules through theologically knowledgeable, spiritually mature, gifted and equipped elders of

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Issues Before the Assembly

by Julian D. Dusenbury

The General Assembly means different things to different people. But whether the world notices it or not, whether the folks back home understand it or not, and whether the participants find it tiresome or enjoyable, the General Assembly is an opportunity to do the King's business. This makes it more important that what happens in Congress, on Wall Street, or at the United Nations. As always, this year's Assembly will address a broad range of issues. Several of the more significant ones are highlighted below.

Before the Assembly formally convenes at 7:30 P.M. on Monday, June 15, the Bills and Overtures Committee and the Committee on Constitutional Business will have begun addressing numerous overtures. Among them is one (Overture #5, Commissioner's Handbook, p. 46) which would revise BCO 15-4 to provide that "No person may serve concurrently on the General Assembly's Standing Judicial

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two classes, ruling and teaching. Ruling elders are elders who, while "able to teach," have major concern for caring for the flock and governing church life. Teaching elders add to the responsibilities of care and governing the responsibilities of public authoritative ministry of the Word and sacraments. (4) It is a church in which there is true parity among the elders in the courts of the church. Parity requires equality of dignity and authority among all teaching elders, among all ruling elders, and between the ruling elders and teaching elders. It is not so much a matter of equality of numbers as it is mutual respect and a refusal to lord it over one another. Let us have no bishops. If a man emerges as a "leader among the leaders" let it be by the faithfulness of his teaching, the godliness of his character, the helpfulness of his wisdom, the humility of his service. (5) It is a church which believes in and exercises Biblical authority. Such a government is, by principle, limited and restrained because the Bible is the only infallible rule of faith and practice and because the Church's authority is only declarative and ministerial, declaring and administering the will of Christ revealed in his Word. But such a government does have authority, an authority expressed in a system of graded courts in which all the courts are submissive to and limited by Christ's will and in which the lower courts are submissive to the lawful authority of the higher courts. The Church does not resort to the State to enforce its decisions but it does use its spiritual authority to command and direct, as well as to counsel and encourage, submission to Christ's will (Acts 16:4, cf Acts 15:30,31).

We envision *a church with vital Spirit-filled congregations*. We are not romantics who idealize the congregational life of the New Testament churches. We cannot read the letters of the apostles without becoming realists. But we do share the Reformers' vision that there is a pattern of Church life revealed together with descriptions of congregational vitality in the Acts and the Letters of the New Testament.

What do we want to see in the congregations of PCA churches? (1) We want God-centered worship. We are not opposed to rethinking worship Biblically in the light of both history and the contemporary situation. We are opposed in principle neither to historic, liturgically structured worship, nor to contemporary forms of worship, nor to traditional "low-church" evangelical worship. But we do insist that worship is oriented to the glory of God, not the needs of man, and that God in His Word reveals those acts of worship He is pleased to receive when offered through Christ by the help of the Spirit. And we do believe that worship ought to reflect the glory and majesty of our Triune Creator and Redeemer and the conviction that we gather in His presence. (2) We want fresh confidence in the power of competent, relevant expository preaching that both evangelizes the lost and edifies the saints. We have no sympathy either for dull, pedantic preaching or for trendy, contentless preaching. We believe with the *Larger Catechism* (Q. 155) that "The Spirit of God maketh the reading, *but especially the preaching of*

the word, an effectual means of enlightening, convincing, and humbling sinners; of bringing them out of themselves, and drawing them unto Christ; of conforming them to his image, and subduing them to his will; of strengthening them against temptations and corruptions; of building them up in grace, and establishing their hearts in holiness and comfort through faith into salvation." (Emphasis added.) (3) We want growing churches. We part company with any who associate smallness with orthodoxy and godliness. We do not agree with those who are automatically suspicious of bigness. We see in Acts a sustained emphasis on the growth of the churches in numbers as well as in grace (eg., Acts 9:31). With Isaac Watts we sing, "We long to see thy churches full. . . ." (4) We want healthy congregations which are outward and inward looking. Such churches refuse to choose between outreach and nurture, between seeking the lost sheep and caring for the flock. We want churches in which the members are growing in knowledge, love, and holiness, and becoming equipped to serve Christ in reaching the world and building up the Church. We want churches in which people are received, loved, taught, disciplined, and trained. But we also want churches which are constantly seeking to win and incorporate those who do not know the Savior. (5) We want praying churches, churches which live and work by corporate prayer. We are anxious when some of our British friends observe that the American Church seems to be active, prosperous, and successful but largely prayerless. We believe the Church should see itself as the defenseless widow of Luke 18, who persists in prayer until the blessings come. We want a church which accomplishes great things for the Lord not by the power of planning, or publicity, or programs, but primarily by prayer joined to preaching.

We envision *a church with a right understanding and practice of the relationship between the Church and the Kingdom*. We want the PCA to be a church which blends the best of the Southern Presbyterian emphasis on the spirituality of the Church with the best of the Dutch emphasis on claiming all the world for Christ and His kingdom.

What specifically do we mean? (1) We want the PCA to be a church which understands that the Church and Kingdom are interrelated but are not identical. The Church is the central institution in the Kingdom but the Kingdom is broader than the Church. (2) We want the PCA to maintain the Church's unique and limited calling as that institution Christ has established to proclaim and teach the Word, to administer the sacraments, to gather, nurture, and equip the people of God. We do not want the Church's message diluted or its mission confused by its involvement in activities, which, while legitimate kingdom work, are not the calling of the Church. (3) We want the PCA to be a church which builds and extends the kingdom, not by doing kingdom work itself, but by teaching the Word, declaring the will of Christ on every matter on which he speaks in his Word; by imparting to its members a vision for the Lordship

of Christ over all of life; by enabling the saints to see their callings in life as citizens, family members, and workers as opportunities to extend the kingdom; and by encouraging God's people to apply the principles of the Word to every sphere of life in the world. (4) We want the PCA to be a church which, while willing to testify to the state or society when the Word of God requires, does not bind the consciences of its members or risk unnecessary disunity by speaking or acting outside its sphere of concern but which gives its members the freedom, as individuals or groups or coalitions, to think and act as Christians in the spheres of education, politics, the arts, and indeed in all of life. We are convinced that the interests of the Church and Kingdom are best served when the interrelatedness of and distinction between Church and Kingdom are maintained.

As we live through this last decade of the 20th century and look ahead to serving Christ in the 21st, let the PCA be a visionary church. Let us not be weak on "the vision thing," but let us clearly define for ourselves and boldly declare to the world what we want to be as a church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Ω

William H. Smith is an associate pastor at Wallace Memorial Presbyterian Church

A Christian Perspective on AIDS, Part II*

by O. Palmer Robertson

Finally, what is the cure of AIDS? How are we as Christians to respond in an age of AIDS?

Currently there is no medical cure to AIDS. Millions of dollars have been poured into AIDS research. But to this date there is no cure for AIDS. As Christians we should want to see relief from the suffering caused by this plague as soon as possible. We should not appoint ourselves as judges of the earth and declare that people get what they deserve when they suffer from AIDS. We must not forget that we also have broken God's law and deserve a judgment worse than the suffering caused by AIDS.

There is no current cure to AIDS. But in the grace and goodness of God there is an alternative that is better than a cure. There is a preventative to AIDS. It is a very simple preventative. It is good news, news that has been a part of the gospel since the beginning of time. That good news is not contraceptives.

Contraceptives are not a safe preventative to AIDS. Young people are being terribly misled when they are told that exposure to the AIDS virus can be avoided by the use

of contraceptives. The possibility of exposure may be reduced; but the use of contraceptives is by no means a safe way to avoid contracting the AIDS virus.

One partner of a Christian marriage tested HIV positive. You may wonder how a Christian could test HIV positive. But it could happen in a number of ways. The person could have had the disease before being converted to Christ. The person could have fallen into sin, or contracted the disease through blood transfusions. In any case, the couple knew that the man tested HIV positive. They decided to live a normal life, using contraceptives. Shortly thereafter the other partner also tested HIV positive. They both will die of AIDS.

Looking from afar, it may appear to be a very romantic picture, with lovers dying in the arms of one another. But if you had been the one infecting the person you loved more than any other on the face of the earth, you would not think it a very loving thing to have done when you saw the sufferings you had caused your loved one to undergo.

Contraceptives are not a safe preventative to AIDS. But in the ordering of God, "individuals who observe chastity until marriage and fidelity in marriage are virtually immune to sexually transmitted HIV infection" (Smith, op. cit., p. 25). The circle of love that surrounds the God-ordained home gives natural protection from the transmission of AIDS. Think about it. It is like circumcision in the Old Testament. Circumcision was ordained by God. It marked individuals as the people of God, while simultaneously protecting them from many diseases. If you follow the law of God regarding intimacy in sexual relationships, then you will have exercised the natural preventative that God has established. Live according to God's law and you will put into effect the most effective preventative possible against the disease of AIDS. Recognize that as a believer your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit which belong to God.

In this regard, it is important as a confessing believer in Christ to get beyond the motivation of merely trying to save yourselves from the AIDS plague. If self-protection is your principal reason for remaining chaste, then you will probably fail some day. Rationalizations somehow will prevail apart from the higher motivation of wanting to serve and glorify Christ your Savior. Not just for self-protection but for the honor and glory of the Lord Jesus Christ who gave up his life for you, live a pure life before God and men. By his grace you can restrain yourself from sinful activities that would dishonor him.

A special word about prevention may be addressed to those who now or in the future may test HIV positive. One prominent member of a community contracted the AIDS virus as a consequence of being unfaithful to his wife. As the disease progressed, he began to develop all kinds of associated illnesses. But he never let his wife know that the reason for these illnesses was that he had AIDS. Eventually the wife became infected with the AIDS virus, although she had

*The author is indebted to Christians in the Age of AIDS by Shepherd Smith and Anita Moreland Smith (Wheaton, IL 1990) for a great deal of the material in this article.

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no idea that she was infected. Right during this time, their daughter was due to give birth to their first grandchild. The doctor had predicted a complicated delivery, so the grandmother-to-be went to the hospital, ready and anxious to donate blood. Fortunately there was no need.

Some months later the woman learned that the cause of her husband's many illnesses was that he had AIDS. Shortly thereafter, she became ill herself. Now we understand that because of the dangers of AIDS transmission, hospitals are very careful in testing blood offered for transfusions. It may be expected that the infection in the grandmother's blood would have been detected. But by one person's failing to make known that he had the AIDS virus, three generations in one family were imperiled.

If you have tested HIV positive, be courageous enough to admit it to others. You can prevent your loved ones from being exposed. If you know that your past behavior may have infected you with the AIDS virus, be courageous, be tested and live out the rest of your life accordingly. "Secondary virginity" is worth a lot in the age of AIDS. A person may already have lost his original virginity. But remaining pure from this point on in your life may mean a lot to yourself as well as to others.

A further concern of the Christian community with respect to AIDS today should be the matter of ministering to people who have AIDS. All through the ages, Christians have been distinguished as a people of courage, willing to risk their lives for the sake of others. Ever since Jesus Christ embraced the leper, and told the story of the good samaritan, his disciples have been willing to risk their lives in helping the outcasts of society.

It does not mean that you should be foolish in exposing yourself and your loved ones. But know the facts. Respond to the needs. Manifest Christian compassion in the age of AIDS. As opportunities arise in your church pray that God may give your congregation courage and grace. Pray that your elders may be given wisdom from God in leading your church in the concrete expression of Christian compassion in an age of AIDS. Remember. The person who tests HIV positive has come to a critical point in his life. He stands before certain death. He faces great suffering—social, physical, and emotional suffering. By these circumstances he may be driven to seek God in a way that he has never sought him before. He may be brought to the point of crying out for mercy to Jesus Christ. Can we as a church say to a person in this situation, "Not here. You are not to find Christ here?"

Finally, you know where to look for the final cure of AIDS. Faith in the resurrected Jesus Christ is the only hope for a final cure of any terminal disease. As Paul in Romans 8 says, the whole creation groans. We who are under this current plague groan. We groan, waiting for the redemption of our bodies that shall be accomplished at the resurrection. A final cure for AIDS is found in the power of new life created by the resurrected Christ. Even for the AIDS victim it can be said that the sufferings of this present world are not

worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us who believe in the resurrected Christ (Rom. 8:18).

A group of Christians in Philadelphia have banded together and started a ministry to people with AIDS. They have taken as their scripture motto a verse from the prophet Hosea who says, "God shall turn the valley of trouble into a door of hope" (Hos. 2:15). Christianity brings this message of hope in an age of AIDS. For "weeping endures for a night, but joy comes in the morning" (Psalm 30:5). Ω

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Commission and any of the General Assembly's permanent committees." This proposal is important because it endorses the "separation of powers" principle embodied in our own US Constitution (and appropriately traced to the principles and practices of Calvin and his successors.) It would prevent a situation—which has actually occurred under our present system—in which the same person is simultaneously a member of our "legislative" body (the General Assembly), an "executive" agency (e.g., Committee on Administration), and the Standing Judicial Commission. The real or apparent conflicts of interest which are presently possible would be eliminated by Overture #5, and would encourage balance in the Assembly over the years to come.

Even those commissioners who are not on a committee will be able to give consideration to several weighty issues before the Assembly begins by means of pre-Assembly seminars (Monday, June 15, 3:30-5:00 P.M.). Among the dozen seminars offered, a number will address the crucial matter of evangelism from several vantage points. Covenant Seminary professor Jerram Barrs will consider "Making the Gospel Intelligible to Today's Secular Man"; Dr. John Gerstner will address the subject of "Reformed Faith and Evangelism"; and Dr. Morton Smith will discuss evangelism from the standpoint of "Presuppositional Apologetics." "The Final Word," led by Dr. O. Palmer Robertson, will address continuing revelation, a vexing subject of profound importance to the church. In addition, March Bell, a PCA elder who is also a trial lawyer with the US Justice Department will offer instruction about "The Christian's Role In, and To, His Government." Commissioners may be frustrated by the fact that these and the other seminars are offered simultaneously, and only once. But they will be glad to hear that they can have access to all of them, since they all will be taped.

Among the items the Assembly will address once it convenes will be the work of the Ad Interim Committee on Divorce and Remarriage which will be reporting back after a year of further study. Several aspects of this year's report (Commissioner's Handbook, pp. 2301-2417) seem improved over last year's. A number of the responses received from the presbyteries have been incorporated into the new report. The revised report also includes additional information in the form of appendices by RE David Lachmann and

Dr Will Barker, both of which interact with the committee's already extensive historical and exegetical work. The Assembly is not being asked to adopt the counselling guidelines and resources included in the revised report, but merely to make them available for consideration. However, the committee is asking the Assembly to take an action which should prompt considerable debate by recommending an amendment to section XXIV.6 of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. The suggested wording would make it clear that the desertion of which Paul speaks in I Cor. 7 allows for remarriage only when a believer is deserted by an unbelieving spouse. Whether the committee's (and John Murray's) opinion of the church's conservatism concerning altering the *Westminster Confession* carries the day, the point itself is a good one. The committee has served us well by bringing this clarification to our attention.

Worship continues to be a topic about which substantial and emotional disagreement within the PCA continues to exist. This year's Assembly may have an opportunity to address this matter by its appointment of a study committee on the subject. Such a committee will doubtless have a difficult task, but it also may be used of the Lord to clarify the issues and unify our minds and hearts, if not always our practices in this crucial area. Naturally, the definition of the committee's task and the composition of its membership will be crucial to its effectiveness. Selection of members should be a matter of prayerful and careful consideration.

One judicial case handled by the Standing Judicial Commission deserves some notice (Case 91-4; Commissioner's Handbook, pp. 2028-2069). This case concerns a complaint by TE James Hopper against the James River Presbytery for its refusal to allow him to teach or preach his views concerning prophecy and tongues. In denying the complaint, the commission reaffirmed the Presbytery's right to be the court of original jurisdiction concerning teaching elders and to exercise oversight regarding their credentials and their preaching. Quite properly, the Commissions judgement rests on constitutional rather than theological considerations.

The form in which issues will appear before this year's Assembly are not controversial in themselves. But as always, the Assembly is an important one. May God use this General Assembly to strengthen the foundations of biblical presbyterianism in the PCA. Ω

Julian D. Dusenbury is an assistant pastor at Wallace Memorial Presbyterian Church.

Church Growth, PCA Style, and Statistics

[The following is a response from the Rev. Robert S. Schoof to an article in the January-March 1992 Session to Session

by Robert W. Patterson. Mr. Schoof has been with the PCA since 1974, and was a member of the original "Mid-Atlantic Presbytery."]

I joined the Mid-Atlantic Presbytery in the summer of 1974 at its second or third meeting. We met at the West Hopewell Church and, as I recall, had 9 churches present and 19 Teaching and Ruling Elders. At that time the presbytery boundaries were from the North Carolina border to Canada and from the Atlantic Ocean to Ohio. I wish Mr. Patterson could have been a part of that presbytery and felt the warmth of spiritual fervor and love that permeated the meetings and the presbytery. We met on Friday nights in what we called our "Popular Service". We sang, testified, prayed, and preached. We reserved our business for Saturday and always came away with a grand sense of having been about the King's business.

There was a strong spirit of evangelism and desire to spread the Gospel by planting new churches. The spirit of that presbytery was led by men like the Rev. Kennedy Smartt, Rev. Jim Edwards, Rev. E. C. "Midge" Cooley and was most clearly stated by RE Don Fisher of the Chapelgate church when we received that church into presbytery. Don stood, with tears of joy flowing and said, "If this is what you guys do for Presbytery what do you do for revival?" The presbytery was small and with few resources, but God provided in marvelous ways so that there was continual growth in every direction. We sent a man to New Hampshire and worked with Bill Iverson in New Jersey, and in the ensuing years had numerous churches join and many started. Without going into the start of every church in the presbytery let me simply say that Mr. Patterson's statistics need correcting. He says "By 1989 the judicatory expanded into 3 presbyteries consisting of 78 organized congregations and 3 mission churches representing 21,581 members." That's not bad growth but the facts are even more amazing. In 1990 the statistical yearbook shows that in actuality by 1989 8 presbyteries had come out of that one judicatory (Ascension, Heritage, James River, New Jersey, Northeast, Philadelphia, Potomac, and Susquehanna Valley). There are now 176 churches and 2 missions representing 42,321 members.

As Mr. Patterson says, "Success stories are not hard to find." He is right. In these presbyteries are vibrant congregations. As Chairman of the MNA committee of presbytery I visited a number of them and encouraged some to begin as Mr. Douglass had encouraged me to begin the work in Alexandria. The churches are not all large, but there were only 12 apostles and 120 in the upper room. Many of the new works have a strong commitment to evangelism and a unity that is a great encouragement. I hesitate to say they all have this same spirit of vibrant outreach for fear of being guilty of violating a principle that Dr. Cornelius Van Til taught us in apologetics. He said that if you wanted to say that there were no "schnakes" in a particular acre you had to be able to say you knew what was in every foot of that acre. On the

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other side of things, generalizations like "many could pass for a generic Bible church in terms of worship, liturgy, and music. In all probability, not many will stock their pews with the new Trinity Hymnal" and "On the other hand, churches that have transferred from independence or other Presbyterian denominations tend to be substantially larger, more viable, and more established" ought not be included in an article that purports to be scholarly.

Concerning the developments from the original Mid-Atlantic Presbytery where I have personal knowledge I would like to offer the following statistics. In James River Presbytery of the 22 churches, 9 were works begun by Presbytery (excluding Korean churches where I lack infor-

mation). Of 6481 members, 2251 belong to those 9 churches or 39%. Of 158 professions of faith, adult and child, 102 were in those 9 churches or 65%. In Potomac Presbytery, according to the 1990 statistics, there are 49 churches. To the best of my knowledge, 26 were works of the Presbytery or joint works with "Mother churches." Of 12,436 members, 4117 are in these 26 churches, or 33%. Of 614 professions of faith, 330 or 54% were in these new churches. These samples of statistics, I believe, would fit the pattern of the other 6 presbyteries that came out of Mid-Atlantic. There is a vibrant spirit in the PCA and many good things are happening throughout the country and in Canada. In the few churches I have visited the majority have a strong commitment to Presbyterianism. We ought to be giving thanks to our Heavenly Father for His mighty works in our midst.

I hope this response might present a picture that is more in keeping with what the record shows, and bring greater glory to our God. Ω

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