



*"The Only Infallible Rule
of Faith and Practice"*

The Concerned Presbyterian

*True to God's Word and Loyal to Historic
Presbyterian Doctrine and Polity*

BULLETIN NUMBER 35

PAGE ONE

THE 115th GENERAL ASSEMBLY

by Dr. C. Gregg Singer

Both liberal and conservative writers have tried to evaluate the 115th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States which met in Charlotte in June. Some have considered it unexciting and uneventful; others have considered it quite conservative, while others have simply held that it was controlled by the liberals and was designed to create no fears and not to allow any outbursts of radicalism which would endanger the establishment. There is a germ of truth in all three of these views.

It certainly was quiet, even to the point of being dull at times. It certainly was conservative in contrast to some recent General Assemblies which were in some ways exciting but were actually boisterous and unbecoming to the Christian Church. But to say that it was conservative is to misread the entire situation. It was by no means composed or run by theological conservatives.

For this reason we of Concerned Presbyterians take the view that it was a highly managed and controlled assembly, controlled for the purpose of dismissing the fears of the conservative elements in the church, and, if possible, lulling them to sleep in the dreamy conviction that the worst was over and the storms of dissent had passed.

When we examine what was actually said and done as well as what was not done, the evidence points to the conclusion that this third view is the correct one. We are fully aware of the fact that many of our brethren in the Covenant fellowship have taken a more optimistic view of what took place in this 115th General Assembly. But we cannot share this optimism and we do not do so for several reasons.

In the first place, both of the leading candidates for the office of moderator took a very forthright stand in favor of union with the UPUSA and for the adoption of the new Declaration of Faith. It is true that they did not press for immediate passage, but they also made it very clear that they were devoutly wishing that both of these proposals would be an accepted reality by 1977.

In this connection, it is also interesting to note that the fraternal delegate from the General Assembly of the UPUSA had also been a leader in the debate in the General Assembly of that denomination for the official recognition of the Gay Caucus

within that church, under chapter 23 of their Book of Government, thus placing this homosexual group on the same level as the Presbyterian Layman, the Northern counterpart of Concerned Presbyterians

Although the plan was defeated, this fraternal delegate who so strenuously advocated the proposal received a rousing welcome from the commissioners at Charlotte after he had given an unusually long fraternal greeting. The liberal or radical leadership of the PCUS was not unaware of the role which he had just played in the General Assembly of the UPUSA and still they regarded him as the proper representative to extend greetings. It might also be added that this fraternal delegate in his greeting made a strong and vigorous plea for union between the two denominations. Obviously, the support of homosexuality and other deviations from the Scriptures gave this fraternal delegate great status with the hierarchy in our General Executive Board. For us of Concerned Presbyterians, such a stand is hardly consistent with the historic testimony of the Presbyterian Church, U. S. and can hardly be regarded as a conservative gesture.

The report of the committee which wrote the new Declaration of Faith was calculated to pour oil on troubled waters of theological controversy and in so doing mislead the unwary. In his report, the chairman placed great emphasis upon the fact they had listened very carefully to all suggestions coming from the Presbyteries and had made some changes in the wording of the Confession. He particularly noted that they had paid attention to the criticism that the original draft did not set forth the Biblical doctrine of the virgin birth of Jesus Christ. This criticism was certainly well founded. But the editor of this bulletin would like to point out that the change which the committee made was essentially a change without any substance. The new phraseology, "born of Mary the Virgin" does not safeguard this precious and necessary Biblical doctrine. The claim that it represents the Chalcedonian formula is open to serious question at best. The most normal translation of the revised phrase still leaves the virginity of Mary open to serious question and its most normal interpretation would be that Mary had been a virgin until she was betrothed to Joseph. This is obviously a far cry from the phraseology of the Scriptures, of the Apostles' Creed, and of the Westminster Standard.

We can only ask the question why the committee felt it necessary to change the Westminster Confession at this point and deprive it of the grandeur of its statements in favor of a statement which, if not purposely deceptive, is quite misleading. Of equal importance in our evaluation of this General Assembly were the significant omissions in its actions. Readers of our bulletins are well aware of the fact that our last bulletin was directed to the issues which we called upon this General Assembly to correct. At no time did the General Assembly give any recognition to the issues set forth in this bulletin. We were not asking the General Assembly for recognition as Concerned Presbyterians, but we were hoping and praying that they would address themselves to the issues at hand, for these are the issues which are disturbing the peace of the church and which will continue to disturb the peace of the church until they are corrected. No General Assembly has any right to be considered as conservative which fails to answer these complaints and persists not only in ignoring them but in the actions which caused them.

Even more disturbing, if possible, was the refusal of the General Executive Board to pay any attention to the special letter which we of Concerned Presbyterians addressed to the Moderator and officers of that board. This address simply asked the GEB to explain how a reported surplus in the financial situation of the church in February, 1975 could by May somehow become a shortage of \$2 million. In that address, which was sent to about seventy leading newspapers over the General Assembly, we simply raised this question. We were very careful to point out that we were not in any way raising questions of possible dishonesty, and we certainly made no charges of that kind. But the GEB gave no satisfactory answer either to Concerned Presbyterians or the membership of the church at large. They removed some people from office but did nothing to explain the situation, and we feel that a grave injustice has been done to those who were removed from office, and a cloud has been cast over the integrity of the GEB. In our opinion, a forthright answer to this question would have been a much better testimony to Jesus Christ by the Presbyterian Church, U. S.

Perhaps the most distressing and alarming evidence of a continued theological decline in the leadership of the PCUS is to be found in the sermon by the retiring moderator. This sermon by no stretch of the imagination could be called Biblical or evangelical. It was purely humanistic with

enough Biblical phraseology to satisfy those who are content with the church as it is and to mislead the unwary who want desperately to see some kind of an evangelical stance in the hierarchy. Not only was the sermon devoted to the coming union with the Northern Church, but this moderator went on to insist that such an organic union must grow out of a theology which accepts humanity out of grace. He insisted that true evangelism must deal with the acceptance of our humanity and that he declared that God wants us to accept our humanity by grace. This is most certainly not the Biblical view of evangelism. It is sheer humanism tinctured with Biblical phrases in sufficient quantity to disguise the basic existentialism which was the real text of this message, if it is possible to find text of a Biblical nature in existentialism.

It is very difficult for the editor of this bulletin to discern a truly conservative theology or program of action in the decisions of this General Assembly. Admittedly, there were some window-dressing decisions which gave this meeting a somewhat different tone and appearance than its recent predecessors. But if the conservatives are still clinging to the hope that they can somehow preserve the historic testimony of the Presbyterian Church, U. S., the 115th General Assembly can hardly be of much assurance to them.

Recent actions by lower courts in several states and by the South Carolina Supreme court indicate that wherever a minority of a congregation wants to remain loyal to the PCUS the courts have ruled that the loyal minority is the PCUS congregation and have awarded them the property. Presbytery will come to the financial and legal aid of the minority.

Where there is a unanimous vote of a local congregation to withdraw from the PCUS, there does not seem to be any basis for a complaint. To secure a unanimous vote in your congregation, requires patient work in educating each member as to the reasons for separation. The reasons being, the authority of the Scriptures, God's Word.

Literature is available from Concerned Presbyterians, Inc. to assist in educating your membership on the reasons. It is free.

We have consulted the best legal advice obtainable as to the procedure a congregation should follow if they did not want to accept a new Confession of Faith or go into union with the UPUSA. The best legal counsel on this problem is available to your local attorney as to procedure. We will furnish a copy of these suggestions to any church desiring same.

Willis H. Owens

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REFLECTIONS AND COMMENTS ON THE 115th ASSEMBLY

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What, if anything, was really accomplished in Charlotte by the commissioners to the 115th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States? Well, it is highly unlikely that this gathering on the lovely campus of Queens College will subsequently be chronicled as one that reversed any major trends in the denomination or initiated any profound new ones. To be sure, it would be accurate to label this year's Assembly as one which was far more "conservative" than the past two had been. As a matter of fact, one could almost detect a subtle "backlash" with reference to previously-established directions in the PCUS.

Many evangelicals and conservatives will rejoice in what they consider to be a number of pluses at this meeting. Among these will be the following; the defeat of the suggested "unit vote" procedure in amending the constitution, the refusal of this Assembly to adopt the "devil-demons" paper, the sending back of the health and eschatology papers, the taking of a strong position against gambling, the rejection of unconditional amnesty, the failure of the taxes-designation resolution, the adoption of a strong and positive statement on evangelism, and the concerted attempt to call the General Executive Board to fiscal and managerial responsibility. On the other side of the ledger, certain minuses have to be recognized, such as the continuing commitment of the PCUS to what many of us see to be an extremely poor restructure of the Church and to day-to-day programming procedures at the GEB level which are at best, poor, and at their worst, devastating; and such as the pressing on by the 115th toward union with the UPCUSA and toward adoption of the new confessional standards, though there certainly was very little enthusiasm for these latter "projects" at this particular meeting of the highest court.

It seems to this reporter that only the most naive of us would take much heart from the adoption by a given Assembly of a strong statement on evangelism or of a solid priority like personal spiritual growth. Why? Because of the importance of content! Titles mean nothing; content is everything. Highsounding, drum-beating priorities can be verbally trumpeted, but without solid biblical content and earnest commitment at the grass roots level of the Church, it's all as sounding brass or as a

tinkling cymbal. Let us remind ourselves that the real issue in our Church is Scripture.

The inspiration and infallibility of the Bible is at the very heart of the problems we have about union with another denomination, a new declaration of faith, new subscription vows for ministers, and, many others. We must not allow the issue to be clouded, even by elegant and eloquent cries of peace, brotherhood, and the unity of "persons." Is our denomination, at all levels of its life, prepared to submit everything it plans and does to the scrutiny of the Word of God? That seems to be the genuinely crucial question.

Why is it that conservatives across the PCUS are finally aroused by a two-million-dollar deficit in GEB spending, having not been previously aroused by equally poor management of the ministries of the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ? Is this saying that we are more concerned over the handling of the treasury of the denomination than we are over the handling of the Great Commission? If that is, indeed, the case, then we had best face our shortcomings and do so quickly! Very few conservatives who remained in the denomination spoke out boldly in protest of the crunching, harsh treatment that has been doled out by some PCUS leaders to those who departed our ranks and formed the nucleus of the Presbyterian Church of America. This reporter listened carefully this year as the Assembly turned a gentle, conciliatory countenance toward the PCA, even as numerous Presbyteries gobble up, through legal actions properties of congregations in which huge majorities have voted by conscience to leave the PCUS for the new denomination. Where is the love of which we speak so freely in circumstances such as those?

Perhaps in the place of the upcoming study on the middle judicatories the PCUS needs to seriously consider the fact that its recent restructure just isn't panning out. This commentator disagrees strongly with our present moderator regarding the philosophy underlying and undergirding the restructure, particularly with reference to the existence and functioning of the GEB. The personal response of this reporter to bigness, centralization, and bureaucracy is that they are unsound, un-Presbyterian, unworkable, and generally unspiritual! Will it be possible to restructure the new structure? It is apparent that such an effort has to be made.

An even more basic question comes to mind than the restructure issue. What, after all is said and done, is the General Assembly supposed to be?

Having observed the past three meetings of this particular court, this writer cannot believe that what has taken place at Fort Worth, Louisville, and Charlotte constituted, philosophically and ecclesiastically, what an Assembly is supposed to be and do in the light of historic and classic Presbyterianism. The conviction here is that the General Assembly ought to be a biblical, theological court of review for the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ, and not the program-maker, activities-scheduler, and program-builder which it has obviously become. Should sessions and Presbyteries not properly be the courts of ministry and mission, with the General Assembly simply coordinating the world missions thrust and reviewing carefully for biblical soundness the many grass roots ministries? For this writer, the only answer to the present dilemma is a clear, open, and vigorous return to the real genius of Presbyterian Christianity, which is a two-way flow of spiritual power initiated basically in local congregations, rather than a "masterswitch" bureaucracy, which keys on a rather confusing priority-building system and implements priorities with a central management and evaluation system that evidently was discarded some time ago in the business world.

Samuel Johnson once wrote, "The future is purchased by the present." Indeed, myopia may be the greatest problem of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. Tomorrow must not be allowed to just happen. It must be planned, fashioned, and moulded by the living Lord Jesus through His people today. It will be too late to purchase tomorrow, tomorrow. What are we saying here about the 1975 Assembly? Simply that the measure of the Charlotte Meeting will not be how many issues the liberals and conservatives won and lost, but rather the extent to which these commissioners were obedient to Jesus Christ in their present moment of opportunity. Wouldn't it be well for you and I to apply this criterion to our personal lives today, to that meeting of our session next week, and to this fall's Presbytery meeting? May God give us grace to stand firm in the Word during these tough days when time seems so short.

Our Executive committee has decided that we should stay in this work until the issues that are disturbing us are settled. We will need your support and prayers in order to continue.

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