

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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What Should True Presbyterians Do at the 1936 General Assembly?

J. Gresham Machen

Editor's note: This essay originally appeared in The Presbyterian Guardian in mid-1936 as advice from Dr. J. Gresham Machen to "true Presbyterians" who were commissioners to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church. We reprint the essay because it applies so well to today's situation in both the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church in America, whose 2007 General Assemblies will be held in June. For details of this parallel, see Paul Elliott's massively documented book, Christianity and Neo-Liberalism: The Spiritual Crisis in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and Beyond.

This article is addressed to those commissioners to the 1936 General Assembly who represent the evangelical minority in the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A. It is not likely that they will be numerous. The Modernist-Indifferentist forces now dominating the Church have done their work well and have very effectually prevented the election of clear-sighted evangelical commissioners. But here and there a man has no doubt been allowed to slip by. There will probably be a little group of commissioners who know that all is not well with the Church and that the opponents of the Gospel and their associates are more or less in control. You who belong to that little group are asking what you ought to do during the days of this General Assembly. I am going to try to tell you to the very best of my ability, just in case I may be of any help to you at all. Whether you follow my suggestions or not, I do not think that you, at least, will object to my telling you just as briefly and plainly as possible what I think.

I. DO NOT BE DECEIVED

The whole program of the General Assembly is carefully planned in such a way as to conceal the real issues and give a false impression of faithfulness to the Word of God. I do not mean that the deceit is necessarily intentional. The men conducting the ecclesiastical machine are no doubt in many instances living in a region of thought and feeling so utterly remote from the great verities of the Christian Faith that they have no notion how completely they are diverting attention from those verities in their conduct of the Assembly. But the fact remains that the whole program, from whatever motives, is so constructed as to conceal the real condition of the Church.

1. Conference on Evangelism. One instrument of concealment is the program of the pre-Assembly Conference on Evangelism. That program is carefully planned. Its very name suggests to unwary persons that the Church is perfectly orthodox. "Evangelism" certainly has a reassuring sound. The contents of the program also often provides sops for the evangelical minority in the Church. There is nothing that Modernist ecclesiastics love quite so much as evangelical sermons that serve as the prelude to anti-evangelical action. They are such effective instruments in lulling Christian people to sleep.

2. The Lord's Supper. A second instrument of concealment is the celebration of the Lord's Supper which comes at the very beginning of the opening session. Ah, what an impression of unity and piety that celebration makes! Yet how utterly false is such an impression! Seated there at the table of the Lord are men who, in the Auburn Affirmation or otherwise, have publicly cast despite upon the blessed thing that the Supper commemorates, and are now engaged in excluding ruthlessly from the ministry young men upon whom Christ has laid his hands.

3. Prayer. A third agency of concealment is prayer. Public prayer is not a proper means of pushing measures through a deliberative body. When rightly practised it is one of the sweetest and most precious privileges of the Christian life. But when misused to shelve important issues or gain an unfair advantage over opponents in debate it is a very objectionable thing. Unfortunately it is sometimes misused in that way in the General Assemblies of the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A.

4. The Apostles' Creed. A fourth agency of concealment is the repetition of the Apostles' Creed. Someone has said, perhaps with a certain element of truth, that congregations begin to repeat the Apostles' Creed only after they have ceased to believe in it. Certain it is that the repetition of the creed has been practised at the General Assembly in the most misleading possible way. At the General Assembly of 1927 there was a particularly outrageous example of this device. The Assembly had decided in an administrative case, allegedly on technical grounds, to agree to the licensure of a man who would not affirm belief in the virgin birth. This had been accomplished only because the Moderator, Dr. Robert E. Speer, by a ruling which he himself was afterward obliged to admit to have been illegal, permitted the New York

commissioners to vote in a case in which they were parties. Had they not voted the result would have been reversed. A commissioner moved that the action of the Assembly should not be construed to weaken the testimony of the Church to its faith in the virgin birth (see *The Presbyterian* for June 9, 1927). Dr. Speer ruled this motion out of order as being new business, but then repeated the Apostles' Creed, or the part of it containing the mention of the virgin birth, and had the Assembly rise to express its agreement.

Such a procedure, or the mere ritualistic repetition of the creed is – be it plainly said – often little better than humbug. The question in the Church is not how many people are ready to express formal agreement with the Apostles' Creed or repeat it in ritualistic, parrot-like fashion, but how many are ready to *insist* upon the great verities that it contains when the thirteen hundred Auburn Affirmationists cast despite upon those verities or when candidates are examined before presbytery as to their qualifications for entering the ministry.

There will probably be such humbug at this Assembly, as there has been at so many other assemblies. You should not be deceived by it.

5. Singing. A fifth agency of concealment is the singing of "Blest be the tie that binds." That is a fine hymn, very sweet and precious when the love which it expresses is in the heart and not merely on the lips. But at the General Assembly, when it is dragged in at unexpected times, it often marks some particularly vicious and unbrotherly act. Loving words, especially when set to a familiar tune, are the most effective possible disguise for unloving deeds.

6. Moderatorial Bullying. A sixth agency of concealment is found in Moderatorial bullying and ridicule. Some humble commissioner, thinking in his naive ignorance that the Assembly is a deliberative body, and that one member has as much right as another, arises to speak. He is told to come to the platform.

Then ensues a contest between the Moderator and the humble commissioner. It is hardly a very sporting contest. The odds are too much on one side. The Moderator is clothed with the authority of a presiding officer. Back of him, on the platform, sits the customary company of admiring representatives of the Boards and of the rest of the ecclesiastical machine, ready to applaud or laugh at just the proper places. The humble commissioner, on the other hand, is abashed. His voice is quite untried. He is ignorant of the ropes.

Under such circumstances, what chance has the humble commissioner? Very little chance indeed. It is quite an easy thing to send him back to his seat amid jeers. The unequal contest is soon over. I pity anyone who can enjoy watching it. Bearbaiting was less cruel.

This Moderatorial weapon of ridicule was used with particular ruthlessness at the last General Assembly by Dr. Joseph A. Vance. On one occasion a commissioner came forward, apparently from a bad seat under the gallery to which he had been assigned, not by his own volition, but by the Clerk. What did the Moderator do? Did he try to equalize the disadvantages of the seating? Did he try to put the unknown commissioner at his ease? Not at all. "Here comes somebody from the catacombs," said he as the commissioner came from under the gallery.

I do not know who that commissioner was. I do not at all know whether he feels as I do about the treatment that was accorded him. But even if he does not feel so, I am obliged to stick to my

opinion. I am obliged to think that the remark of the Moderator on that occasion was typical of the whole spirit of the Assembly and of most Assemblies during the last ten years. "Thank you, Dr. So and So, for your splendid statement," says the Moderator when some prominent representative of the ecclesiastical machine has spoken. "Here comes somebody from the catacombs," says he contemptuously when some humble commissioner rises to speak.

Sometimes even Moderatorial bullying and the unchivalrous temper of the Assembly are unable to prevent a man from getting a hearing. The Rev. H. McAllister Griffiths at the 1934 Assembly, then unknown to most of the commissioners, was at first jeered in the customary way, but before the Assembly was over was listened to with respect. He *compelled* people to listen to him. Finally, at the 1935 Assembly the machine seemed to fear him so much that it deprived him of his seat. Regularly elected by his presbytery he was ousted by the Assembly without any slightest semblance of judicial process, at the instance of the Modernist party in the Presbytery of Philadelphia. I do not think that that act could possibly be surpassed for sheer lawlessness. But it was an eloquent tribute to the powers of Mr. Griffiths and his associates among the Philadelphia commissioners.

Of course the Moderator of this present Assembly, though no doubt he will represent the machine, *may* prove to be a fairer presiding officer than certain others. He *may* keep his personality out of his conduct of the Assembly, as every fair presiding officer ought to do. He *may* refrain from abusing his ecclesiastical opponents in speeches from the chair. He *may* give the humble commissioner something like a chance when he rises to speak. We hope that he will do these things. If he does, he will certainly be very different from many of the Moderators in recent years.

7. False Use of Sentiment. A seventh instrument of concealment is the false use of perfectly worthy sentiment for partisan ends.

In 1933 there was a contest regarding the Board of Foreign Missions. The Assembly's Committee on Foreign Missions brought in a majority report favoring the policy of the Board and a minority report opposing that policy. Now every year it is the custom to read the names of the missionaries who have died during the year. The Assembly rises in respect to the honored dead, and is led in prayer. It is a solemn moment.

Where do you suppose that solemn service was put in? Well, it was tagged on to the majority report from the Committee! Then, after the solemn hush of that scene, the minority report was heard! Could anything have been more utterly, unfair? The impression was inevitably made that the minority report was in some sort hostile to that honoring of the pious dead. The sacred memory of those missionaries was used to "put across" a highly partisan report whitewashing a Modernist program, which some of them might have thoroughly condemned. Unfortunately they were not there to defend themselves against that outrageous misuse of their names. There is urgent need of a reform of the Assembly's program at that point. The honor paid to departed missionaries should be completely divorced from the report of the Assembly's committee on the Boards. That is only one instance of the way in which, at the Assembly, legitimate sympathy is used to accomplish partisan ends. Very cruel and heartless measures are sometimes pushed through under cover of sympathetic tears.

8. Limitation of Debate. An eighth instrument of concealment is the limitation of debate. The Assembly is very prodigal of the commissioners' time – and, incidentally, of the Church's money.

It allows hour after hour for the presentation of reports. But there is one thing for which it has scarcely any time at all. That is the consideration of the great central question whether its agencies are or are not in accordance with the Word of God. If it considers that question at all, it is pretty sure to push it aside to the worst hours of the afternoon.

So I suppose this coming Assembly may devote some time to the question of the merger of the Boards of National Missions and of Christian Education. But I doubt whether it will allow any time at all to the incalculably more important question presented by the unfaithfulness of each of these boards. Keeping the commissioners occupied from morning till night about other things is the best possible way of diverting their attention from the doctrinal unsoundness in the life of the Church. Consideration of *methods of preaching* is a good way of avoiding attention to the far more fundamental question *what it is that is to be preached*.

II. WHAT SHOULD EVANGELICAL COMMISSIONERS DO?

In such a situation, and facing these obstacles, what should you evangelical commissioners do? I am going to try to tell you in a few words.

1. Pray. When I say you ought to pray, I do not mean bow your heads and go through the form of prayer. I do not mean that you should pray for the vague things that an unfaithful ecclesiastical machine wants you to pray for. But I mean *real* prayer. I mean the prayer in which a Christian man, in the way pointed out in God's Word, comes to God and asks him for things that are in accordance with his will. I mean more specifically the prayer which lays before God the present awful condition of the Church and asks God to give the answer. You ought to engage in such prayer during the period of the Assembly's sessions. You ought to engage in it in private. You also ought to engage in it with the little group of Christian men, sorrowing for the condition of the Church, who will no doubt meet for prayer somewhere in Syracuse during that week.

2. Read. When I say just in this particular place – after the mention of prayer – that you ought to read, I am not referring to the reading of God's Word. Doing that comes logically before prayer. But I am referring to reading things that are necessary for your information about the issues before the Church. Read the official "Blue Book." Read the official "White Book." Read all the reports presented to you for your consideration, and make up your own mind about them in the light of God's Word. Read also the present issue of *The Presbyterian Guardian*. It is only fair to read what both sides have to say.

3. Speak. If you speak before this hostile General Assembly you may be subjected to ridicule. Never mind! Your Saviour was subjected to ridicule too. If you really love him, you will not be ashamed to bear his reproach. Speak then before this hostile Assembly whenever the great issue comes up. You will not carry the Assembly with you, but you may save some soul by your testimony to your Saviour and Lord. In the face of an apostate General Assembly, do not be afraid to say a "good word for Jesus Christ." Be sure you speak to the specific point that is under discussion. Even if you do so you may be ruled out of order by the Moderator, who of course will represent the machine. But if you are ruled out of order, let it be unjustly and not justly.

4. Bring in Minority Reports. If, by some oversight of the machine, you are elected to one of the important committees, do

not sign on the dotted line. Bring in a minority report. A. Gordon MacLennan brought in a minority report at Indianapolis against all the other members of the Bills and Overtures Committee. To the amazement of everyone the minority report carried the Assembly and the great evangelical utterance of 1923 was the result. *Your* minority report will not carry this Assembly. The ecclesiastical machine has done its work too well and the apostasy of the Church has progressed too far since 1923. But it is your duty to bring in a minority report all the same. It is always a sin to put your name to what you know not to be true. So it is a very dreadful sin to join in with the customary whitewashing of these Modernist Boards. If you do so, God will require at your hands the souls that are being lost through the propaganda that these Boards are carrying on.

5. Vote. If you have not the ability to speak, surely you ought to pluck up courage to vote. When one of these great issues comes up, will you not at least say "No" in an audible voice whether you do or do not think that anyone else will say it with you? Surely that at least is not too much for you to do for the Saviour who bought you with his precious blood.

III. REPORT OF THE PERMANENT JUDICIAL COMMISSION

When the Permanent Judicial Commission brings in its report on the cases involving the issue between Christianity and Modernism – the judicial cases or complaints involving the members of The Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions, the Rev. John J. De Waard, the Rev. Arthur F. Perkins, the matter of the licensure of John W. Fulton, the erasure of the name of the Rev. Henry W. Coray from the roll of the Presbytery of Lackawanna and the extra-constitutional questions asked by the Presbytery of Donegal – the Moderator will put the question:

"Shall the preliminary judgment of the Permanent Judicial Commission be made the final judgment of the General Assembly?"

If after hearing the judgment you are in agreement with it, you should vote for this motion. If you are not in agreement, it is your solemn duty to vote against it, even if you are the only person in the Assembly who so votes. If you do not discharge that duty you may regret it all the rest of your life. A commissioner must make a decision at that moment for or against the Bible and for or against the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

IV. OTHER ISSUES BEFORE THE ASSEMBLY

1. The Moderatorship. The first act of the Assembly is to elect a Moderator. One of you ought to nominate a Moderator who is opposed to the present Modernist and Indifferentist machine, and all of you ought to vote for him. There is not the slightest chance that any such Moderator will be elected, but that does not affect your duty in the slightest. The Moderator of the General Assembly is not just a presiding officer. He appoints the chairmen of all the Committees and has great power over the policy of the Church. It is not right for a Christian man to vote for a Moderator who will use that power for the continuance of the present anti-evangelical policy. Therefore a truly evangelical man ought to be nominated for the position, no matter how few votes he receives.

2. The Committees. The second act of the Assembly is the election of Committees by the "electing sections." Some of the Committees are important; others are unimportant. The Committee on "Bills and Overtures" is particularly important; but

others of the Committees are also important – notably those that make nominations for positions on the Boards and on the Permanent Judicial Commission. You ought to nominate really evangelical men for the important Committees. There is no chance that many such men will be elected. The machine will in most cases see to it that only "safe" men get into such positions. But you ought to do what you can to place a representative of the evangelical minority here and there.

There is not the slightest chance that such men can obtain a majority of any Committee, but they can bring in minority reports and thus serve to bring the great issue between Christianity and Modernism to the attention of the rank and file of the Church.

3. The Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America. You should oppose in every possible way the continuance of the connection of our Church with this Modernist agency, which is doing such untold harm to the souls of men. Particularly bad is the "National Preaching Mission," which is mentioned on pages 30 and 52f. [of the "Blue Book"].

4. The Mission Study Textbooks. The General Council quotes with approval a "statement of principles" couched in the typically vague language so dear to the unbelief of our day, and squelches the whole effort to stop the flow of poison in the missionary textbooks by contenting itself with the ridiculously futile declaration "that only authors of known evangelical belief and evangelistic zeal should be selected by the Missionary Education Movement to write Mission Study textbooks." What is meant by "evangelical belief"? Something that Dr. E. Graham Wilson, for example, General Secretary of the Board of National Missions, member of the Committee representing the General Council, would regard as evangelical? Well, Dr. Wilson is a signer of the Modernist "Auburn Affirmation." How could anything that he and other Auburn Affirmationists would regard as evangelical possibly be regarded as evangelical by men and women who hold to the Word of God?

You should try in some way to express your dissatisfaction with this method of smoothing over the objection of evangelical people in the Church to the missionary textbooks.

5. Aid-Receiving Churches. The Manual for National Missions Churches, and the actions proposed for this General Assembly by the General Council and by the Special Committee on the Manual for National Missions Churches, simply wipe out the vestiges of real Presbyterianism so far as aid-receiving churches are concerned and provide for the tyrannical imposition upon those churches of the Modernist educational and missionary program of the central church organization. According to the plan proposed on pages 92ff. of the "Blue Book," a vacant church receiving aid even has to take the pastor imposed upon it by the synodical committee on National Missions.

You may call that form of church government what you will. But whatever it is, it is certainly not Presbyterianism.

Every real Presbyterian will oppose with might and main this anti-Presbyterian and anti-Christian program of tyranny and Modernism among the aid-receiving churches. How can any real Christian man possibly give his money to a Board of National Missions that favors a policy like that? You should oppose that policy at the General Assembly every time when it comes up, and you should formally register your solemn protest against it.

6. "The Years Ahead," etc. The pamphlet under this title, recommended for approval by the General Council, is not to be procured here in Philadelphia as yet. You should certainly vote against approval of it unless you have had time to study it

thoroughly, and it is difficult to see how you can study it thoroughly in the time at your disposal. In general, it is a good rule to vote against any proposal that you have not been given adequate opportunity to examine. The following of that rule might help put a stop to this whole business of adoption by the General Assembly of whole volumes that scarcely any commissioners have read. A similar remark is to be made about "Christ in the Community." The chances are at least a hundred to one that these programs are in accordance with the general current of the Church and opposed to the Gospel. The presumption is dead against them. You should act in accordance with that presumption until you are convinced, by careful study of the documents, that the presumption is wrong.

7. Report of the Bills and Overtures Committee. The Bills and Overtures Committee may report at any time. It "springs" its reports on the Assembly and thus often causes overtures looking to reform of the Church to be rejected before more than a corporal's card of commissioners have the slightest notion what is being done. You ought to be watchful and ask to be heard on overtures that are being treated in that way. At least you ought to vote against shoving them aside. Some of the reform overtures are referred by the General Council to other committees. They are then reported on when those other committees report.

8. Report of the Commission of Nine. At the last General Assembly the Modernists in the Presbyteries of Philadelphia and Chester secured the appointment of a commission to investigate those two presbyteries. It was of course a thoroughly partisan commission. Its report Hitlerizes the presbyteries in the most un-Presbyterian and un-Christian way. The sessions of the commission in Philadelphia were held in secret and no one who would not agree to that secrecy was heard. The Presbytery of Philadelphia has now been made quite safe for Modernism. The evangelicals have very little representation among the commissioners which it has sent to the General Assembly.

9. Merger of the Boards of National Missions and Christian Education. As I have already remarked, the question of the merger of these Boards is by no means so important as the doctrinal unsoundness of each of the Boards. Nevertheless, you should certainly vote against it. It is an extreme example of that centralization of bureaucratic power which is working so much harm in the Church.

10. Reports of the Committees on the Boards. These reports always consist of two parts: (1) the whitewashing of the Boards; (2) the presentation of the machine's slate for members.

You should vote both against the whitewashing and against the machine's slate. If any evangelical is on any one of these committees he should bring in a minority report. But whether such a minority report is or is not brought in, you should vote "No" on the whitewashing and on the slate.

V. CONTINUATION OF THE TRUE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

If the great issue in the cases that are being considered by the Permanent Judicial Commission is decided as there is every prospect that it will be decided, you should register your protest at the Assembly, return home and make your report to your presbyteries, and then, as the covenant of the Presbyterian Constitutional Covenant Union says, proceed to "perpetuate the true Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A., regardless of cost." May God richly bless you in that testimony to the honor of his name!