

Sermon for Sunday, June 17, 1973 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"NEW WINDS ARE BLOWING"
(A Look at the 113th General Assembly)

I have just returned from the 113th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, U.S. This marks my fourth Assembly in succession and the third one in which I have returned to Central to make a report to you. For the first time I return with a sense of excitement and hope. There is a fresh, new wind blowing through our denomination. The Holy Spirit is moving in a dramatic way throughout our denomination. Let me share with you some of the background of this Assembly.

It began at the 112th General Assembly last year meeting in Montreat, North Carolina, our national conference grounds. At that meeting the moderate-conservative segment of our denomination was successful in electing Dr. L. Nelson Bell as moderator. For the following year this great servant of God, this great dedicated, committed, conservative leader went about the church calling her back to her historic commitments to Jesus Christ. Without fear or equivocation he met issues head-on. When the radical liberal element tried to intimidate him, he refused to back down. He called a spade a spade when it came to the issue of union with the United Presbyterian Church or the ecumenical movement or the radical social gospel.

But even as this mighty man of God whom God had raised up for such a time as this was calling the church back to her historic commitments and to the foundations of the Bible, the radical conservative element in the church was planning to pull out of the denomination. These were men who were close to the heart of Dr. Bell. They were men who had worked and labored with him across the years for great, evangelical causes. Yet, because he believed what they were doing was wrong and because he felt that schism in the church was not the will of God, he would not compromise his faith. So, even as he had faced the radical liberal element without flinching, so he now faced his old friends without flinching. As he had spoken the truth to others in love, now he spoke that same truth to his friends in love to tell them they were wrong.

Yet, in spite of this, a number of dissidents met in Atlanta in May to lay the ground work for a pull out and a new denomination.

As the 113th General Assembly met, these were the tensions in the air--first, the radical liberal element was determined to keep the denomination moving in the direction they desired and the radical conservative element had begun its withdrawal. As the Assembly convened for worship last Sunday morning, Dr. Bell arose to preach the sermon. It was to be a powerful message entitled "Humanism-Counterfeit Christianity." Speaking to a packed house, Dr. Bell said, "The church is in the gravest danger of changing her message, which is the saving and keeping power of Jesus Christ, and the Living Water for the dry and hopeless mirage of a changed world through humanistic endeavor." He went on to say, "The basic message of the Gospel is the death and resurrection of Christ for man's salvation from sin. How far have we departed from this message?" he asked. "How much have we permitted the ills of this world to mislead us into thinking that the Gospel is not sufficient or that it is basically irrelevant--and in doing so accepted and preached another gospel, which is not gospel at all?" "All too often," he said, "We have been promoting humanism instead of Christianity. We have been so concerned with the magnitude of the results of sin in the human heart that we have become obsessed with symptoms while we have neglected the cause and the cure God has provided in the person and work of His Son." Dr. Bell did not say the church should not be involved in social problems, but he did put them in perspective. He told of his own years on the mission field as a missionary doctor and said, "I am convinced that the

message of redemption from sin through faith in Jesus Christ must go hand in hand with every social program. Otherwise, it is not Christianity but humanism...." He concluded by saying, "Humanism, the supreme counterfeit, is here among us. Recognize it and turn from it as you would turn from the plague."

After lunch, the Assembly convened again to begin its work. Again Dr. Bell stood to address the Commissioners as he gave his Retiring Moderator's Report. This time he did not dodge the issue before the Church as he had not dodged it from the beginning. The news release put it this way, "Dr. L. Nelson Bell, retiring moderator of the Presbyterian Church, U.S. today pounced on the liberals and dissident conservatives in the church, blaming them for a division in the denomination." In his report Dr. Bell said that the meeting of the Assembly was "being held under the shadow of a now established plan on the part of some for leaving our church. In my opinion," he continued, "this is a tragedy, for we are seeing brothers and sisters in Christ determined to promote the division without perhaps fully having weighed the consequences. We should pray for them, and for ourselves." Then he spoke to the liberals as he said, "On the dissidents' part this is the culmination of a long series of actions by presbyteries and by the General Assembly which many have felt to be unwise, unwarranted and, in some instances, contrary to the historic doctrines and polity of the church."

It was at this point in his report that a very significant thing happened. Dr. Bell said, "The most foolish thing the church can do is to ignore, without adequate study, the reasons given by those who are leaving the church....There has never been a real attempt," he said, "to sit down and dispassionately discuss the differences which have now become magnified to the point of actual division." Then he suggested that the Assembly appoint a special seven man committee which would study the major points of difference and dissension in the life of the church, bring to the church a clear statement on the causes of this unhappiness and division and make concrete recommendation aimed at their solution and the restoration of peace and harmony. Immediately after his report, the General Assembly moved to set aside its standing rules to authorize the appointment of such a committee with Dr. Bell to name three of the members. In my opinion, this could be one of the most significant committees in the denomination in recent years. Now there will be opportunity to confront the whole church in an official way with the problems that face her because of radical elements to manipulate and control the courts of the church.

Dr. Bell concluded his report by stating, "Perhaps unwittingly, but nevertheless truly, we have been following men rather than God, and as a result now find ourselves adrift on the uncertainties and futilities of man-made organizations and philosophies that have nothing to do with the true nature and message of the church." He concluded, "God forbid that we should silence the message of God's intervention on behalf of a sinning and lost humanity in the person and work of Jesus by shifting our attention to social engineering, which cannot solve the world's problems nor bring peace to the individual heart."

Dr. Charles E. S. Kraemer was elected moderator. Dr. Kraemer led the Assembly in applauding Dr. Bell when he expressed appreciation for Dr. Bell's loyalty "to the Presbyterian way at a time when there were great pressures for him to do otherwise." The Assembly gave Dr. Bell a standing ovation. A few minutes later when he was presented the traditional plaque with a gavel on it symbolizing his year as moderator the Assembly again stood and gave Dr. Bell a great ovation. I have never known of any moderator to get two such ovations in a matter of ten minutes.

Incidentally, Dr. Kraemer will make a great moderator. He is president of the Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond where our Christian educators are trained. He is evangelical in theology and if we must classify people, I suppose he would fall in the category of a moderate liberal. He will be fair and just and

during the Assembly he moderated the meeting with great wisdom and a lot of humor.

I wish I had time to share with you all of the things that happened at the Assembly. I wish I could share in detail the spirit of the caucus of the evangelicals. I wish I had time to tell you the details of a moment when a great conservative leader, Dr. Robert Strong of Alabama who has refused to join the schismatic group in our church, was given a standing ovation by the Assembly when he made the report of a standing committee of which he was chairman. Most of the standing committee chairmen were evangelicals because they were appointed by Dr. Bell and I wish I had time to share the friends they made for us by the way they conducted themselves and the spirit of fairness that they exhibited. I do not intend to imply that the evangelicals won everything for we did not. But we did create for ourselves an image at this Assembly that will stand us in good stead in years to come. On the other hand, the radical liberal element made some obvious power plays that exposed them in ways that people became aware of their efforts to manipulate the Assembly. It is evident that a new wind is blowing throughout our denomination and that the denomination made a significant shift in its direction towards a return to our historic, evangelical position.

Let me share with you briefly three things that took place at this Assembly that I think are of great significance. First, we discovered that Dr. Billy Graham was returning from Korea where he had held the greatest evangelistic crusade in the history of the world, speaking on one occasion to the largest crowd in history. He was to be in Dallas for a meeting during the Assembly. We got a resolution passed asking him to address the Assembly. There were those there hostile to Dr. Graham and opposed to his ministry. Yet, in a 15 minute period he so won over the entire Assembly that he won from them a great standing ovation. Meeting with the youth immediately afterwards, he won from them a similar response. Yes, fresh new winds are blowing throughout our church!

The second significant thing was the adoption by the Assembly of a resolution that evangelicals had put in. It was a resolution that expressed grief over those who are leaving our church and extended a hand of love to them. It expressed concern over the things in our denominational life that had caused them to go, and it called the church to a new commitment to our historic position as to the authority of scripture, the validity of our confessional standards, and the urgent need for proclaiming the Gospel and calling men everywhere to saving faith in Jesus Christ. I wish I had time to read the entire resolution to you. It is a tremendous reaffirmation by the highest court of our church to the fundamentals of our faith. It is a significant evidence of a return to historic Presbyterianism and a significant evidence of a turning in the life of the church towards evangelical faith.

Thirdly, I would like to share with you the most significant action of this General Assembly. Last year the General Assembly reorganized and we have now what is called the General Executive Board. Now the way our program in our denomination will work is one year the church will set priorities. The next year the programs to emphasize the priorities selected will be approved by the Assembly and then the following year will be implemented. So this year for the first time, we were setting priorities for 1975. Next year we will include programs to implement them. Now eighteen priorities were suggested to the Assembly this year and all the standing committees were to rate these priorities and the church would set up priorities for 1975. Now these eighteen priorities that were given to us were not always to our liking. For example, there was one entitled "Peace, Justice and Reconciliation" described this way: "To encourage and equip the church to provide leadership in the struggles for peace and justice, and, where possible, to effect reconciliation in tensions both in national and international affairs." We felt this was an effort to inject the church into the political arena where it has no business. There were some things that were obviously omitted from the priorities. So, we decided that what we would

try to do. One of us would take the most offensive one and rate it last hoping to turn the computer rating down on it. We would all agree what the most important issue was and all of us vote for that and then in the standing committees to try to add a new priority that wasn't there.. We wanted this priority to be personal spiritual growth. We felt that throughout our denomination that what we really needed was to get our people back to studying the Bible, back to exercising a devotional life, back to worship, back to prayer. We thought that ought to be one of the real priorities of our church so our people went into the standing committees and suggested that each standing committee adopt this. When the priorities were announced that had been selected, the radical liberal element was most unhappy so they came to the floor of the Assembly with a substitute list of priorities and in a demonstration of grab for power, attempted to reprioritize the church. They did not like the priorities as they came out and they tried to change them. They failed. In 1975, the number one priority of our denomination will be "Evangelism and Outreach". The number two priority will be "Personal Spiritual Growth" to help the people in the church to grow in their life through the disciplined practice of Bible study, a lively witness and a vital worship. We were successful in helping the church reach priorities that we felt were most significant. That's exciting!

There was a reporter there who had been interviewing me off and on during the Assembly about how I felt about things and how things were going. She was aware of some of the political tensions there. Toward the end of the Assembly after the power play had been beaten back, the Church had adopted the priorities with these two first, she came to me and she said, "You know, a funny thing is going on in the press room. All of the reporters are talking about how suddenly this Church has changed directions--becoming evangelical and evangelistic." Yes, new winds are blowing. It is an exciting time to be a Christian, to be a part of what God is beginning to do among us.