

Sermon for Sunday, June 22, 1975, by Andrew A. Jumper, D. D., Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"THE CHURCH AND HOW SHE FARES - 1975"

I Timothy 4:1-16

Text: "Take heed to yourself and to your teaching; hold to that, for by so doing
you will save both yourself and your hearers." I Timothy 4:16

In the limited time I have this morning it is going to be very difficult to share with you in any adequate way what has gone on this past week in Charlotte, North Carolina, at the 115th meeting of the General Assembly of our denomination. I am delighted to report to you that it was the most conservative Assembly in the last twenty years or so. Conservative evangelicals won every major issue before the Assembly and the radical liberal element in our denomination was handed its worst defeat in many years. It was a great day for those of us who have been working so hard for so many years to turn our church back to what we consider to be the primary business of the Church. It does not mean that the battle is over, but at least we can begin to see some significant progress.

This year the General Assembly had four major issues before it. Before I discuss them in some depth, let me give you briefly some of the other actions that I consider to be important. First, in the area of social activism the Assembly refused to adopt a paper on the problems of farm workers and simply referred the matter to local Presbyteries. In years past, the social action leaders in our church have gotten the church involved in many and varied programs of this sort that have been detrimental to the primary mission of the church. This year the Assembly gave a firm "no" to the proposal. Second, the Assembly rejected proposals related to the so-called women's Lib movement. They soundly rejected a proposal to do an expensive study on female lay employees of the church after a woman Advisory Participant gave a stirring speech against the Committee on Women's Work. She said that the woman's lib movement did not speak for the women in her area and if the church wanted to know what the women thought and felt, they should ask Presbyterian presidents and local Women of the Church groups, rather than women activists in the so-called Women's Concern group.

Third, the Assembly refused to pass a mandatory retirement for ministers at age 65. In order to change our Book of Church Order, a change must be approved by one Assembly be passed on favorably by a majority of the Presbyteries, and then approved again by a second Assembly. To my personal knowledge, only once before in recent years has the Assembly failed to give a second approval to a change when it had already been approved by a previous Assembly and approved by a majority of the Presbyteries. However, it became apparent on the floor of the Assembly that the motivation for passing the forced retirement change was stimulated by those who wanted to force out older ministers to make way for younger men. The Assembly simply refused to divest itself of the experience and wisdom of these mature servants of the church and by an overwhelming majority refused to pass the retirement act. It was a stunning defeat for those trying to make radical changes in our church. Actually, ministers who desire can retire voluntarily as early as age 63 without loss of retirement benefits, so the man who wants to retire can, but the man who wishes to continue to serve can do so.

A fourth significant action by the denomination was to pass a resolution that indicated openness to the Presbyterian Church of America and actually adopted a resolution indicating the hope that someday reunion might be possible. You will remember that in 1973 a large number of conservative churches pulled out of our

denomination and formed a new church, the Presbyterian Church of America. By giving this indication of openness to the new denomination, our Assembly made it much easier for those congregations wishing to become a part of that new church to do so. Presbyteries can no longer refuse to dismiss churches to them on the grounds that they are schismatic or divisive. Our Elders will recognize the significance of this as it relates to church property.

There were many other such actions that were exciting and it was indeed gratifying to see the Assembly move so strongly in such an evangelical way. However, there were four major issues before the Assembly that I want to share with you so that you will understand what is happening in our denomination. The first issue I would mention is that of fiscal integrity. Last year our church overspent its income by 2.2 millions of dollars. The budget this year has a planned deficit built into it of 500,000 dollars, leaving us with unrestricted reserves of only 1.4 million. That is how close we are to bankruptcy! At the same time, it became apparent early in this year that the estimated receipt of benevolences would fall far short of what was anticipated. As a consequence, the General Executive Board of our church had already made a sweeping 20% cut in the 1974 budget. It is not certain even yet that this will be enough for with a third of 1974 gone, only 22% of benevolences had been received--and that is on the revised budget at that! The Assembly stopped short of putting financial handcuffs on the GEB, but it let our national leadership know in no uncertain terms that it would not countenance further deficit spending and that it wanted the GEB to get its financial house in order. It also made it clear that if further cuts had to be made, it preferred that no cuts be made in foreign missions. The liberal leadership of our church has spent great sums of money in recent years on social activism projects, on political lobbying and other activities that the grass roots people of the church simply do not agree with. As a consequence, the leadership is reaping the fruits of its disregard of the average layman, who has simply quit giving to the General Assembly. Now the Assembly has spoken forcefully and loudly and our leadership has gotten the message from the church in no uncertain terms.

The second great issue before this Assembly was the integrity of our view of Scripture. It happened this way: last year the Assembly asked the Council on Theology and Culture to prepare a paper on "The Problem of a Personal Devil and Demons." Now, the paper concluded this way by saying, "We have compassion for those who really believe in the devil and demons" after having admitted that Jesus and his disciples believed in the reality of Satan. But the issue was much broader than demonology. The real issue at stake was how the church will interpret scripture. The proposed paper was admittedly the product of an approach to scripture that is called "demythologizing"...a method of interpretation that rejects the miracles of the Bible as being myths. For example, this method claims that Jesus was not born of a virgin and that he was not literally raised from the dead. Instead, his so-called resurrection was a myth devised by the early disciples to express their conviction that Jesus was alive in their hearts. So, you see, the issue was much more significant than the subject of Satan. It had to do with our whole approach to the integrity of Scripture--can we trust it literally, or must we assume most of it is myth and seek to make our own interpretation of what it really says? The Assembly acted most decisively on this matter. It not only refused to adopt the paper, it even refused to send it out to the church for study. The paper was merely received as information which is a nice way of saying, "Thanks for your work, we'll put it into the circular file." This action was again a sharp rebuke to our liberal theologians. As a sort of aside, let me add that the paper was written basically by a professor in one of our denominational seminaries. Now, if the Assembly rejects

what he and some of his colleagues are teaching, and if they are teaching this theology to our ministerial students, shouldn't the seminary boards act to bring the teaching of their schools into conformity with the theology of the church? Are not our young preachers being taught something that the church doesn't accept? This is a most serious matter that demands the attention of our whole church.

The third major issue before this Assembly was the integrity of our form of representative government. In order to make certain changes in our constitution, (such as adopting a new confession of faith or uniting with another denomination), it requires the majority approval of one Assembly, the approval of three-fourths of the Presbyteries, and the majority approval of a second assembly. Now, when the presbyteries vote, by a majority vote they vote either yes or no on a constitutional change and each presbytery gets one vote. Since we have 60 presbyteries, 16 of them can block a vote on an issue that requires a 3/4ths vote, such as the issue of a new confession of faith or union with another denomination. Now, since certain elements in our church are trying to change our confession of faith as well as bring about union with the United Presbyterian Church, and since they know they cannot get 3/4ths of the Presbyteries to approve it, they tried to change the system of voting. According to the proposed scheme, each Presbytery would get one vote unit per 1000 members and instead of one vote per Presbytery, there would be one vote for each 1000 members in the Presbytery. Actually, this is a radical departure from our concept of representative government. It is a move towards a purely democratic form of government. As our system is now, we have a checks and balance. At General Assembly, a presbytery gets representatives according to its membership and the large presbyteries get more votes than the smaller ones. But the check and balance is that each presbytery, regardless of size, gets one vote on changes in the constitution. As you can readily see, the concept of the American form of government came from the Presbyterian church. In Congress, each state has the same power in terms of the Senate, but in the House of Representatives, the states have power according to their population. And also, on constitutional changes, each state has one vote. The proposed change in our church's constitution would be the equivalent of giving California 10 votes on constitutional issues and Missouri only one. In any event, this matter was so soundly defeated in the standing committee that when it came to the floor of the Assembly, those who favored it did not even bother to debate the issue. It was a resounding victory for those who believe in the representative form of government as it finds expression in the Presbyterian Church.

The fourth major issue before this Assembly was the integrity of the mission of the church. What is the primary task of the church? Is it not evangelism? Most people would agree on that. But next comes the question, how do you define evangelism? Now, that may seem simple to you, but it is not. You see, there are those who are not willing to say that apart from Jesus a man is eternally lost. There are those who are not willing to try to lead others to accept Jesus as the only Saviour. And there are those who try to say that we are fulfilling the primary task of the church when we change the structures of society or when we are social activists. Many of us agree that social action is acting out God's love for men, but we object to saying that you can evangelize without talking about Jesus and a man's relationship to him. As a consequence, defining the meaning of evangelism was a big issue before this Assembly. As a matter of fact, your own Session was so concerned about this matter that it sent an overture to Assembly through our Presbytery asking Assembly to define evangelism as being primarily an effort to lead a person to Jesus as his Saviour and Lord. I am delighted to report to you that our Assembly last week adopted a tremendous definition of evangelism that was profoundly influenced by the

action of your Session. The definition says in part, "the General Assembly affirms that evangelism seeks to present Jesus Christ as the only Saviour and Lord and that it aims at the conversion of sinners. It is both an invitation to receive salvation from God and a call to obey and serve Him." One of our leading conservative theologians says that this is the best definition of evangelism adopted by any denomination in America in the last ten years.

Now, why is such a definition important? Here is why: each year our denomination adopts priorities for its programs. Evangelism has consistently been the number one priority of our Church. But if evangelism is defined primarily in terms of social action, then that is the kinds of programs we will have and we will call them "evangelism." But, if we adopt such a statement as this Assembly did, it leaves no doubt as to what it means by evangelism and what sort of programs will be needed to implement it. Thus, at the Assembly level, we should have a new movement to lead people to Jesus as Saviour and Lord. Such a movement could lead to a great outpouring of the Holy Spirit and a great revival in our denomination.

The struggle to move our denomination in evangelical directions is not over. Those of us who have invested literally years of our lives in the struggle might wish it were. Yet, we can rejoice that we can see some fruits of our labor and our prayers. I invite you to join with me and our Session in continuing to pray that God will indeed pour out his Spirit on his Church and that a great revival might sweep across our denomination. Let each of us commit ourselves to keep this local congregation strong by our financial support of it, by our attendance and participation in its programs, and by our continual prayers that God will use Central as a mighty instrument. Let our prayer be, "Lord, renew thy church--beginning with me."

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