

S. Ramsay Wilson
MINUTES

OF

THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

OF

THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

IN

THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA:

WITH

AN APPENDIX.

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pose that intelligent Christians would not find it difficult to determine what papers or periodicals they ought to sustain; they may try such papers by the Bible; they may try them by the standards of the Church, or, according to our Saviour's rule, they may try them by their fruits. "Men do not gather grapes of thorns, nor figs of thistles;" publications filled with railings and misrepresentations, cannot produce the peaceable fruits of righteousness.

And now, brethren, we would say in conclusion, let us with cheerful and Christian confidence, as well as with true humility, put our trust in the living God. We believe the work in which we are engaged is the work of God. If we know ourselves, and we have prayed that we might know ourselves in the present case—our great and only motive has been, to maintain the truth as it is in Jesus. We believe that the interests of truth are at stake—we believe that our standards contain that revealed system of truth, which God has ordained for extending his glory and his salvation over the whole earth; and although we have nothing to do in judging those that are without, yet we cannot suffer this system to be mutilated or perverted by those who teach in our communion, and are professedly under our authority. With brethren of other communions, who honestly differ from us on some points, we have no contest; we leave the questions between them and us, to the judgment of our common Master; but as to persons in our own communion, we must contend earnestly for what we believe to be the *faith*, and whilst we ascribe no infallibility to our own judgments, or even to our own standards, yet the opinions we have formed from the Word of God, must to us be the rule of our faith and practice; and whilst engaged, as we humbly trust, in maintaining the truth and the cause of our Saviour, we look to the living God for the success of our efforts. We also believe that the hand of God has been visible in leading us, and conducting our cause to the present issue, and we hope the same Almighty power will guide us and you in all our future operations.

As reformation has been frequently mentioned in the preceding remarks, we trust it will be understood by our churches, that no new doctrine or practice is to be introduced. The Assembly merely intends that there should be a return to the faith and practice of our Church, as heretofore inculcated in our standards, wherever there may have been a departure. We would further recommend that in view of the events through which we have passed, and the deliverance which we hope Almighty God has bestowed upon our Church, that the second Thursday of December next be solemnly observed by all the members of our communion, as a day of solemn humiliation, thanksgiving, and prayer, and that the churches and congregations in our connexion meet on that day for the purpose of public worship.

WILLIAM S. PLUMER, *Moderator.*

JOHN M. KREBS, *Permanent Clerk.*

Philadelphia, May 31, 1838.

PASTORAL LETTER TO FOREIGN MISSIONARIES.

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, to the Missionaries under the care of their Board of Foreign Missions, wish grace, mercy and peace.

VERY DEAR BRETHREN,

Assembled as usual, as the representatives of the whole Church with which we are connected, to deliberate on its affairs, and to devise measures for extending the Redeemer's Kingdom, we cannot forbear to pour out the fulness of our hearts to those beloved brethren who have gone forth from our bosom to carry the glorious gospel to the benighted heathen.

Not that our confidence in either the wisdom or fidelity of the Board which we have appointed, or of their Executive Committee, is in the least impaired. On the contrary, their annual report, recently received, has our entire approbation, and furnishes new evidence both of their competency and faithfulness. And we trust that all the instructions and communications of the Executive Committee, who are more immediately charged with the supervision of your labours, will be received with all that respect and docility to which they are so well entitled. But as it is our firm belief that the Church, in her ecclesiastical capacity, is bound to superintend and direct, as far as practicable, the missions which she authorizes, we cannot deny ourselves the pleasure of directly addressing you on several subjects which we deem important, and in regard to which we are desirous of stirring up your minds by way of remembrance. The solemnity and responsibility of your situation, as bearers of the Word of Life to those who are sitting in darkness and

the shadow of death; the perils and privations to which you are exposed; and the probable consequences of the manner in which you discharge your ministry, all crowd into our minds, and fill us with unspeakable solicitude, while we entreat your attention to those considerations which, with all respect and tenderness, we would impress upon your minds; and,

1. We earnestly exhort you to AIM CONTINUALLY AT A HIGH STANDARD OF PERSONAL PIETY. We doubt not you have already become convinced by experience, that a strong faith, an humble, tender confidence in the power and faithfulness of your covenant God, and a cheerful submission to the many trials which await you, are peculiarly important to gospel labourers among the heathen. It is perfectly evident that small attainments in piety are altogether insufficient to sustain and carry forward the Missionary in his self-denying and arduous work. Unless you live near to God, and abound in prayer, in reading His Word, and in habits of peculiar and devout communion with the Father of your Spirits, and his Son, Jesus Christ, you will find but little comfort, and probably but little success in your labours. Deep and ardent piety is inestimably precious to every disciple of Christ, and especially to every minister, in every situation in which either can be placed; but in no situation can it be regarded as so vitally important as to those who are called to labour amidst the darkness and desolations of the heathen world, and to encounter the numberless difficulties which the degrading superstitions, the profligate habits, and the philosophy, falsely so called, of the heathen, constantly present. We entreat you, therefore, first of all, and above all, to study to grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. This is your highest duty—your most precious privilege—your surest consolation under all the trials of life—and the most certain pledge that your labours will not be in vain in the Lord.

2. In imparting a knowledge of the gospel to the heathen, BE CAREFUL TO COMMUNICATE ITS PURE AND SIMPLE DOCTRINES, WITHOUT ANY OF THOSE ADDITIONS OR MODIFICATIONS WHICH HUMAN PHILOSOPHY, FALSELY SO CALLED, IS APT TO SUGGEST. God has promised to bless the truth, and he has not promised to bless any thing else. The prayer of the Master is, *sanctify them through thy truth; thy word is truth.* The precious message of life and peace which you bear to the heathen is not *your* message, but *Christ's*. Your duty evidently, then, is to "preach the preaching which he bids you," without turning from it either to the right hand or to the left. Let the Bible be your great directory in every sermon. You are now laying the foundations of divine truth and order among the heathen. See that you every where make Jesus Christ, and him crucified, the chief corner stone. Never admit for a moment the thought of accommodating the doctrines of the gospel to the corrupt taste of your hearers. Be not backward to teach the heathen that, by the sin of our first parents we lost our original righteousness, and became guilty before God; that we are all by nature totally depraved, destitute of holiness and of all strength in ourselves to regain either the image or the favour of God; that there is no other ground of justification than the righteousness of the Redeemer, imputed to us, and received by faith alone; and that without the renewing and sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit, no sinner can either return to God, or be prepared for the holy joys of his presence. These humbling and self-denying doctrines form the great theme of all the apostolical addresses to the primitive churches; and although those holy men, in encountering the prejudices of the heathen, had every temptation to soften the aspect of their instruction, and to accommodate it to the proud claims and the voluptuous habits of those around them, they refused to do either; but whether the heathen would hear, or whether they would forbear, they charged home upon them their real character, and assured them that without holiness no man should see the Lord. Let this practice be your model. You will never be likely to benefit the poor pagans unless you go to them, not with "the enticing words of man's wisdom," but with "the simplicity that is in Christ;" unfolding to them without fear or reserve what they are by nature; what they have made themselves by sinful practice; and what they must be by the grace of God, or eternally perish. All history bears witness that just in proportion as the ministers of religion fail of preaching the pure and simple doctrines of the gospel, their ministry loses its power; vital piety declines, and the Church becomes a scene of discord and strife, instead of heavenly love.

3. BE CAREFUL TO LET YOUR EXAMPLE AT ALL TIMES MANIFEST THE POWER AND PURITY OF THE RELIGION YOU TEACH. Endeavour to exemplify in your own conduct the holy and self-denying system which you bear to them as the gospel of the grace of God. It is deeply to be regretted that so many nominal Christians, with whom the heathen have frequent intercourse, exhibit an example adapted to fill them with prejudices against the gospel, and to make even the name of Christian odious in their view. This melancholy fact renders it of peculiar importance that those who go among them as ministers of our holy religion should study so to conduct themselves as to be "living epistles" in favour of the truth, known and read of all who see them. This will soon satisfy them that you really are what you profess to be, and will be in the place of a thousand arguments in favour of

the religion you profess. For although they are filled with prejudices against the holy system which you teach; yet they are close observers of facts, and will not fail of receiving impressions from them.

4. We entreat you to bear in mind THAT ALL YOUR LABOURS WILL BE IN VAIN, UNLESS THEY ARE ACCOMPANIED AND MADE EFFECTUAL BY THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. "Paul may plant, and Apollo water, but God giveth the increase." "He that planteth is nothing, and he that watereth is nothing, but it is God that showeth mercy." It is of the utmost importance that this great principle in the economy of grace be ever borne in mind in all your ministrations. The moment it is forgotten, you will go forth in your own strength, and God, in righteous displeasure, will probably disappoint your hopes. His glory He will not give to another. Let all your labours, then, be begun and constantly attended with humble, importunate prayer for that power of the Holy Spirit, by which alone they can become efficacious. When most sensible of your own weakness and insufficiency, and most deeply impressed with a sense of your need, at every step, of divine aid, the greater is the probability of your happy success. Ever study to walk humbly with God, and to look to the power of his grace alone for the fruit of all your labours. And let your views of the power and riches of the Holy Spirit's influence be large and confident. The territories of heathenism have already been repeatedly blessed, within our memory, with powerful and most precious revivals of religion; and the time is not far distant when nations, sunk in sin and death, shall be "born in a day." Expect great things, then; and pray without ceasing for great displays of the power of God in convincing and converting sinners, and building up believers in faith and holiness unto salvation.

5. Let the heathen among whom you labour see THAT YOU LOVE THEM, AND THAT YOU ARE INTENT ON PROMOTING THEIR BEST INTERESTS. Your labours will be pleasant to yourselves, as well as more likely to benefit them in proportion to the degree in which you feel and manifest an ardent desire to advance their happiness. You can probably do much for promoting their temporal as well as their eternal welfare, by recommending abstinence from intoxicating liquors; industry, the introduction of important arts and trades; and, in short, every thing which has a bearing on personal and domestic comfort. Every benefit of this nature which you confer on the heathen will endure you to them, and will also prepare them more fully to profit by your evangelical ministrations. In a word, every thing that you can do to lift them up in the scale of knowledge and civilization, as well as of Christianity, will be important, and will forward the great purpose for which you are sent to them.

6. We recommend to your attention, and to your unceasing prayers, THE CHILDREN OF THE HEATHEN. We are far from despairing of the conversion of adults among them. Experience, as well as the Word of God, shows that the power of the Holy Spirit can overcome the most obstinate hardness, as well as the most inveterate habits of pagan profligacy. And, therefore, it will be your duty to preach the gospel to all classes, in every form, and by all the means in your power. Proclaiming the Word of Life, by the living teacher, is God's own ordinance, which ought never to be exchanged for any other, where it is possible to employ it. But still we consider the children and young people as pre-eminently the hope of your missionary labours. The greater susceptibility of the youthful mind—the durability of impressions made in early life—and the comparative ease with which habits are changed which have not become inveterate—all recommend diligent and persevering efforts to form the minds of children and youth, as among the most promising and probably productive departments of missionary labour. But this is not all. Parents themselves are never more likely to be effectually reached and profited than through the medium of their children. They will, of course, regard with favour those whom they see to be labouring for the happiness of their offspring; and when they see their children growing in knowledge and in good habits under the instruction of the Missionaries, this will form a new bond of attachment, and open a new avenue to their hearts.

We exhort you, therefore, next to the preaching of the gospel, to make the instruction of heathen youth, in every form which you may find practicable and expedient, an object of your constant and diligent attention. But let all your schools and instructions be strongly stamped with a Christian character. Let the Bible be every where carefully introduced. Let all your efforts for the benefit of youth be consecrated with prayer; and let the excellent catechisms of our Church be as early and as extensively employed as possible, as formularies of instruction. Recollect that it is our object to raise up, as soon as practicable among the heathen, a native ministry. The attainment of this object will require the most vigorous efforts to educate the young; the selection of the most promising of their number for special culture, and elevating the means of their instruction as far as circumstances will admit.

7. Be careful to MAINTAIN IN ALL YOUR MISSIONS, THE WORSHIP AND ORDER, AS WELL AS THE DOCTRINE OF YOUR OWN CHURCH. We have no desire either to cherish ourselves, or to recommend to you a sectarian spirit. But we cannot think that a warm attachment to our

own beloved Church, and a decided preference of its rites and polity, deserve to be so styled. As long as we believe them to be founded on the Word of God, we must consider an adherence to them as our incumbent duty. And as you are the representatives among the heathen of the Church of your choice, we trust you will faithfully maintain all its claims and usages. The only departure from this principle which we can consider as likely, in some cases, to be necessary, is that which relates to the appointment of ruling elders. In the infancy of the Church, at some of the missionary stations, it may not be always practicable to obtain suitable candidates for this office among the converts from paganism. In this case, as we have no doubt happened in the apostolic age, it will be proper for the teaching elder or elders at each station, to perform the usual duties of the church session until suitable ruling elders can be obtained. It is hardly necessary to add, however, that this expedient ought not to be continued an hour longer than is absolutely necessary.

8. We hope you will be diligent in collecting all the information of every kind, which can be considered as bearing on the missionary cause, not only for your own benefit, but also for transmission to the Executive Committee, for the enlargement of their views, and their guidance in the great work entrusted to their management.

Finally, dear brethren, you are engaged in the noblest cause that can employ the attention and efforts of mortals. Be faithful unto death, and you shall receive a crown of life. And unite with us in prayer that the whole Church may, with one heart and one soul, come up to the performance of this great work. We pledge ourselves, in the fear of God, to you and to the heathen world, that, by the favour of the Almighty King of Zion, we will go forward in this cause, and employ all the means which He may put at our disposal, in prosecuting the enterprise before us. May the Lord inspire you with wisdom, and gird you with strength! And may the Spirit of Missions be poured out in large measures upon all the churches, that they may all feel their obligation, and all, with one consent, and with united strength, come up to the help of the Lord against the mighty!

WILLIAM S. PLUMER, *Moderator.*
JOHN M. KREBS, *Permanent Clerk.*

Philadelphia, June 1st, 1838.

NARRATIVE OF THE STATE OF RELIGION.

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, in examining the several narratives of the state of religion sent up by the Presbyteries, though there are many things which furnish ground for deep humiliation, yet find much to cheer and encourage the friends of the Saviour beyond what is common in the reports of former years. Many of the Presbyteries have sent up no report on this subject. From those which have been made, the Assembly have carefully studied the state of religion and the prospects of its advancement, in the churches under their care, and now submit the result of their examination.

Among the indications of good which we discover, are an increased and increasing attention, in a great number of our Presbyteries, to catechetical instruction, a growing attachment to the doctrines and order of the Presbyterian Church, and a greater disposition to adhere to and sustain the Boards of Missions and of Education which have been established by the General Assembly. They think too that they have been able to derive from the reports, that there is, throughout the churches, an increasing attention to the religious education of youth by means of Sabbath schools and Bible classes, and that these institutions are beginning to be more highly regarded by the churches, and to be taken more directly under the supervision of the pastors and elders than heretofore. They rejoice in believing that the officers of the Church are awakening to a sense of their duty in these respects. From the position which they occupy—from the obligations which they have taken upon themselves, and from the example which they are bound to set to their brethren—they should take the lead in these matters. The mental and moral and religious training of the generation, that is to succeed us in bearing onward the banners of the Cross, should not be left entirely to inexperienced hands. The pastors and elders of the Church should be foremost in the promotion of this object, and their wisdom and experience and steady hand should guide it in the outset, and hold it firmly in the proper course. The Assembly think that the Church is attending to this duty better than heretofore. This fact, and the additional fact that a greater regard is paid to instruction in the Shorter Catechism, encourage us to hope that the children of the Church will be more thoroughly instructed in the evangelical doctrines and precepts of the Scriptures than their fathers were, and that with the proper understanding of these things, the liability of the Church to be distracted hereafter with internal doctrinal dissensions will decrease.

The Boards of Foreign and Domestic Missions and of Education have been conducted