Samuel Miller's Pastoral Theology

By Andrew J. Webb

My own first contact with Samuel Miller, Old Princeton's Professor of Ecclesiastical History and Church Government, came many years ago when I read an essay that had a quote from his *Presbyterianism The Truly Primitive and Apostolical Constitution of the Church of Jesus Christ.* The quote was just a paragraph or two from one of the chapters on worship entitled bluntly "Presbyterians do not observe Holy Days" and after reading it I remember being convinced of his position and thinking I *MUST* find the rest of this! Eventually, I found a copy of the book from 1840 in the library at Westminster Theological Seminary, and I have to admit I probably damaged the spine in the process of photocopying the entire work. It was that book, more than anything else I'd read to date, that convinced me of the truth of Old School Presbyterianism. It brought together church history with biblical exposition and a fervent piety in a way that few men other than Miller have ever been able to.

Those who are familiar with the works of Samuel Miller, will probably have noticed that while his works are all very biblical there is a pronounced bent towards the historical and towards facts rather than speculation, as John De Witt put it "he lived intellectually in the sphere of the concrete."[1] While he understood Reformed theology better than most and could defend it admirably, he was not a systematic theologian like Alexander or Hodge. You *can't* read most of his works and even sermons without very quickly beginning to encounter references to Eusebius or Tertullian or Clement, and his ability to recall those facts of history and apply them practically to the issues of his own day made him perfectly suited to teach Church History and Church Government at Princeton. It's my own private opinion that the church desperately needs men of Miller's historical bent today, because as Ecclesiastes 1:9 reminds us there really is nothing new under the sun and the errors of the present are invariably the errors of the past.

For instance, modern Presbyterian quarrels over confessional subscription have obvious parallels to the quarrels of the English Presbyterians in the 17th century, the Scottish Presbyterians in the 18th century, and the American Presbyterians in the 19th and early 20th century. Competent Systematic theologians might miss those parallels, but able church historians like Miller wouldn't, and I think you will find that as you read Miller, you'll be struck by his amazing historical insights into issues like the office of Ruling Elder and the nature of Baptism. My great hope is that as a result of reading this, someone who has not read Miller might decide to pick up one of his volumes, and perhaps even come to embrace Miller's Old School Presbyterianism as a result.

My aim in this essay therefore is to merely "skip a rock", so to speak, across his life and works hopefully touching the surface at what I hope will be some edifying and helpful points. In particular I want to focus on why Miller's work is still very relevant today, and why he is such a wonderful example of all that was best in Old Princeton and why his life is still an excellent example for our own emulation.

Biography

Samuel Miller was born in Dover, Delaware on October 31, 1769, he was the fourth son of Presbyterian Pastor John Miller, and the eighth of nine children. His grandfather, who was also named John Miller, had emigrated to America from Scotland in 1710.

Miller's father was remembered as both a devoted minister and an American patriot, who strongly supported the cause of the colonies in the American

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1. John De Witt, "The Intellectual Life of Samuel Miller," *Princeton Theological Review* (January 1906): 177–178.

Revolution. In fact John Miller's oldest son who was a physician, enlisted in the continental army and after tending the sick and wounded during the critical battles of Trenton and Princeton, died in early 1777 of exhaustion and pneumonia on his way home to convalesce with his family.

Miller had a fascinating childhood, he was in Philadelphia during the time of the Constitutional Convention, and often would tell in later years of standing within the great hall of entrance of the State House to observe the members of the Convention as they went to and from the chamber. Miller also attended the first General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States. An Assembly called to order by John Witherspoon, sixth president of Princeton University and signer of the Declaration of Independence, and moderated by John Rodgers, who would go on to become his co-pastor in the Collegiate Church in New York. It was this General Assembly that adopted the version of the Westminster Standards with their American Revisions that denominations like the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) and Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) still use today.

Those of you who home school your children may be happy to learn that Miller was home educated by his father and his older brothers, who taught him both Latin and Greek. They did such a good job that in 1788 when Samuel was 18 years old he was admitted to the senior class of the University of Pennsylvania and went on to graduate first in his class the next year and to deliver the Latin Salutory on the dangers of neglecting female education.

After returning home from university, Miller dedicated a day of fasting and prayer to the question of what his vocation should be. He later wrote in his diary, "Before the day was closed, after much deliberation and, I hope, some humble looking for divine guidance, I felt so strongly inclined to devote myself to the work of the ministry, that I resolved in the Lord's name on the choice."[2]

One needs to remember that when Samuel Miller was studying for the ministry it was common for American churchmen to receive their ministerial training via personal tutelage and an apprenticeship under another minister. Miller began his own training under the capable instruction of his father, but this was interrupted when first his mother and then his father died in 1791.

Miller was licensed by his late father's presbytery in 1791. If you are ever tempted to complain about what modern candidates for licensure must endure, please note Miller's *licensure* trials took three separate Presbytery meetings and included oral examinations in Latin and Greek, experimental religion, general college studies, and theology. He also delivered two sermons, an exegetical paper on Luke, and an exegetical paper delivered in Latin on the question whether Christ "descended into hell." I have serious doubts whether most modern ministers could pass this typical licensure exam from 1791.

Miller finished his ministerial training under Dr. Nisbet, a Scottish minister and the President of Dickinson college with whom Miller lived in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. John De Witt stated his belief that it was this association that made it possible for Miller to, "move with ease into learned society" (*Intellectual Life of Samuel Miller*, 173). In this as in so many other things it is possible to see the hand of providence, even in sad events, shaping and preparing Miller for the work that was ahead of him. Miller was more aware of this than most Christians and indeed most ministers, and later in life when struck with typhoid, Miller wrote in his diary, "Oh for grace to improve this solemn dispensation of his providence" (*Life of Samuel Miller*, 1.359).

In 1792, Miller was invited to become a candidate at a church on Long Island. On his way there he visited John Rodgers whom he knew through his father, and was invited to preach for two Sundays in Rodger's pulpit at the Collegiate Church in Manhattan. This preaching was so well received that he was invited to join Rodgers and his associate pastor John Mcknight as a pastor of the churches there. A call was also extended to him at the same presbytery to become the pastor of his late father's congregation in Dover.

A brief word about the Collegiate churches in New York is in order at this point. Readers of 2012 may think that Redeemer PCA is the first "multisite" Presbyterian church in New York City, but actually it was the Collegiate churches. The first Presbyterian church in New York City had been organized in 1716 and was subject to fairly constant persecution from the governor, and the established Episcopal churches in the city throughout the colonial period. As dissenters they were repeatedly denied a charter, despite their growth and good report amongst the citizen. As the original church on Wall Street grew in size, instead of planting independent congregations (with their own sessions and diaconates) they built a new building and called another pastor to assist Dr. Rodgers under the leadership of a single set of elders. Soon after Miller was called to be a

2. *The Life of Samuel Miller, D. D., LL. D.: Second Professor in the Theological Seminary of the Presbyterian church, at Princeton, New Jersey,* 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1869), 1:44.

Pastor, there were three collegiate congregations served by three ministers, who were pastors of all three congregations. Eventually there were four church buildings served on a rotating basis by the three ministers. The system was not a happy one. Miller never thought it was a good idea, and at the time of the retirement of John Rodgers it was decided that it would be better to have three particular congregations with their own sessions and pastors. So if you are not a fan of the multisite model, and you are asked what your thoughts about it are and you want to give a diplomatic answer you may wish to respond, "I like it as much as Samuel Miller did."

After much prayer and fasting Miller accepted the call to the Collegiate Church in New York City and was ordained on June 5, 1793. His ordination exam was much like the previously mentioned licensure exam except that it also included the subjects, of "geography, logic, rhetoric, natural philosophy, astronomy, moral philosophy, ecclesiastical history, and church government."

During his lifetime Miller was blessed in that in all of his ministerial labors his own gifts complimented those of the ministers with whom he was laboring. According to William Sprague, Miller had "an uncommonly polished style, and there was an air of literary refinement pervading all his performances,"[3] while his fellow pastor John Rodgers was "an animated and fervent preacher. He seldom preached without weeping himself; and generally melted his audience into tears."[4] Miller said of this calling that he "served with [John Rodgers] as a son in the Gospel, for more than seventeen years" (Miller, *Memoirs of the Rodgers*, 3).

His labors in New York were by no means easy, especially as the city was often afflicted by epidemics of Yellow Fever from which Miller never ran away even when half the city did. During the epidemic of 1798 for instance, 186 members of his church died, and yet Miller continued to preach every Sunday, visit the dying, and comforting the grieving.[5] In this we are reminded of the devotion of the Puritan ministers who did not flee the city of London during the great plague of 1665, even when the hireling ministers of the King fled their congregations for the safety of the countryside.

In 1801, Miller married Sarah Sergeant, the daughter of a distinguished Philadelphia Lawyer and member of Congress. Oddly enough, although a morally upright woman, Sarah's memoirs indicate that she did not consider herself to be a true Christian when she married Samuel and she did not come to a full assurance of her salvation until 1806. Her eventual combination of piety, charm, and social graces made her the best possible wife for Miller both in New York society and then later in Princeton. He said of Sarah, "The Lord chose for me far better than I could have chosen for myself" (*Life of Miller*, 2.481). They eventually had ten children: one died in infancy and Miller outlived four others. Two of Miller's sons eventually went on to become ministers themselves.

At the turn of the century, Miller preached a sermon that reviewed some of the more important events of the 1700s, which was so well received that it became the basis for a book called, *A Brief Retrospect of the 18th Century* (1803). It should be noted that by "brief" Miller meant two volumes of roughly 500 pages each. The book was later published in England and then in Europe to much acclaim. It was this work with its amazing detail that led to Miller being honored with two Doctor of Divinity degrees, one from his *alma mater* the University of Pennsylvania in 1804 and another from Union College.

It is also noteworthy that very few if any men Miller's age received an honor like the Doctor of Divinity Degree at the age of 35. One elderly pastor when introduced to "Dr. Miller" immediately began asking his opinion on medical matters, and had to be told that Miller was *not* a Medical Doctor but a Doctor of Divinity, which utterly astonished the older minister.

During his time in New York, Miller became involved in what became known as the Episcopal controversy. Prior to the Revolutionary war, the relationship between the Episcopalians and the Presbyterians in New York had not been very good. The Episcopalians felt that as the established Church of England there was no need for dissenting congregations such as that of the Presbyterians in New York, and had done much to make their ministry as difficult as possible. During and immediately after the Revolutionary war, their common hardships had caused their animosity to abate, to such an extent that the Episcopalians allowed them to use their facilities while the Presbyterians were rebuilding

3. William Bell Sprague, *Annals of the American Presbyterian Pulpit* (New York, 1860), 600.

4. Samuel Miller, *Memoirs of the Rev. John Rodgers, D. D.: Late Pastor of the Wall-Street and Brick Churches in the City of New-York* (New York, 1813), 88.

5. [Ed. For additional background on Miller's life in New York City and some of his publications and his contending with the Episcopalians of the city, see, "*Antiquary*: T. & J. Swords. Part One. Printers During the Federal Period to Doctors, Scientists, Friendly and Calliopean Clubers, and other New York Literati, as well as High Churchists, and the Occasional Presbyterian," *The Confessional Presbyterian* 2 (2006), "*Antiquary*: T. & J. Swords. Part Two. Two Large Presbyterian Works," *The Confessional Presbyterian* 3 (2007), and "*Antiquary*: T. & J. Swords. Part Three: The 'High Churchism' Controversy," *The Confessional Presbyterian* 4 (2008).]

their churches that had been largely destroyed during the war. However, by 1800 the Episcopalians were once again asserting that they alone could be considered a true church, and John Henry Hobart, the Episcopal rector of Trinity Church, wrote several pamphlets and eventually two books defending the position that where there were no ordained Episcopal Bishops there was no church. Miller responded admirably with a number of works defending Presbyterianism including eventually the nucleus of his *Presbyterianism: The Truly Primitive and Apostolical Constitution of the Church of Christ.*

It was while he was responding to this crisis that he also wrote what was to become his famous work on the Ruling elder, defending it as a biblical office and explaining its necessity.

By 1806 Miller's talents as a presbyter and authority on ecclesiology were widely recognized and he received another unusual honor when at the age of 36 he was elected Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church.

In 1811 Miller's esteemed father in the faith, Dr. John Rodgers, died and Miller was the natural choice to write his biography, which he did. I have never read a finer contemporary account of American Presbyterianism during the late 18th century and early 19th century. In fact, if the reader has a choice between Miller's biography of John Rodgers and the *Life of Samuel Miller* written by his grandson, I would recommend you read the biography of Rodgers, it is shorter and better written. [6]

Training of Ministers and a New Seminary

Miller had for a long time been a supporter of Ashbel Green's plan for a separate Presbyterian Seminary. By 1800 it was reported that over 400 Presbyterian pulpits were vacant and the need could no longer be ignored. As Ashbel Green put it to General Assembly in 1805 "Give us ministers is the cry of the missionary regions; — Give us ministers, is the importunate entreaty of our numerous and increasing vacancies; Give us ministers, is the demand of many large and important congregations in our most populous cities and towns."[7]

One reason there were so few ministers was that so many of the men going to Princeton University, were now training for other fields, and that the level of piety at that institution ebbed for several years under the Presidency of Samuel Stanhope Smith, a man who had more interest in science and philosophy than theology and who had removed Jonathan Edwards from the reading list. Smith was eventually persuaded to resign in the same year that Princeton Theological Seminary was founded. Initially the trustees had favored calling Samuel Miller, but he himself pressed them to call Ashbel Green and that was their unanimous decision. Happily, the irreligion that had marked the university in recent years began to disappear under Green. Two years later Princeton was blessed with a wonderful revival.

Miller wanted a separate seminary to meet the critical need for new ministers and to counter the liberal influence of established colleges. As Miller put it to Green, "If it be desired to have the divinity school uncontaminated by the college, to have its government unfettered, and it orthodoxy and purity perpetual, it appears to me that a separate establishment will be on many accounts desirable" (*Life of Miller*, 1.242).

Miller's support for this venture both at the General Assembly level and in fund raising made it possible. When on August 12, 1812 Dr. Archibald Alexander was inaugurated as the first professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, Miller was the natural choice to preach the inaugural sermon, in which he laid out the need, warrant, and to a great extent, the plan for the seminary. Charles Hodge, then 14 years old, was present at that ceremony and was deeply impressed by Miller's remarks. He identified the four qualities that make for an able and faithful ministry, and therefore the four things that Princeton Seminary would endeavor to cultivate in its students—piety, natural talents, competent knowledge, and diligence.

It is sometimes thought, even today, that an abundance of learning can overcome a lack of **piety**, but Miller knew otherwise. He knew that a man who doesn't personally know the power of the word can never be a competent expositor of it and that only a pious minister could be a true shepherd. In making this clear Miller asked,

> How can a man who knows only the theory of religion, undertake to be a practical guide in spiritual things? How can he adapt his instructions to all the varieties of Christian experience? How can he direct the awakened, the inquiring, the tempted, and the doubting? How can he feed the sheep and the lambs of Christ? How can he sympathize with mourners in Zion? How can he comfort others with those consolations wherewith he himself has never been comforted of God? He cannot possibly perform, as he ought, any of these duties, and yet they are the most precious and interesting

6. Miller's biography, on the other hand, is tediously detailed and often dry as dust.

7. *Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. General Assembly, Minutes–Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.* (1803) 101.

> parts of the ministerial work. However gigantic his intellectual powers; however deep, and various, and accurate his learning, he is not able, in relation to any of these points, to teach others, seeing he is not taught himself. If he make the attempt, it will be the blind leading the blind; and of this, unerring wisdom has told us the consequence.[8]

Therefore, Miller felt it was necessary that the seminary train up not just *learned* but *pious* ministers. He quoted John Witherspoon to reinforce that point: "Accursed be all that learning which sets itself in opposition to vital piety! Accursed be all that learning which disguises, or is ashamed of vital piety! Accursed be all that learning, which attempts to fill the place, or to supersede the honors, of vital piety! Nay, accursed be all that learning, which is not made subservient to the promotion and the glory of vital piety!" (*Sermon Delivered*, 18).

As important as piety is, Miller was well aware that piety alone is not sufficient to make a man qualified to be a minister. Miller noted that a minister must also have **natural talents**. He meant that a minister didn't need to be a genius, but he did need to be a man of discernment, discretion, and good sense. He pointed out that men wouldn't go to a doctor who had no common sense so why would anyone want a "physician of the soul" without it? He noted that a lack of discernment and discretion was liable to be the cause of "perversions of scripture, those ludicrous absurdities, and those effusions of drivelling [*sic*] childishness, which are calculated to bring the ministry and the Bible into contempt" (*Sermon Delivered*, 21). Sadly Miller's statement sounds like a prophetic description of what the public has come to expect from the preaching of modern televangelists.

As to the third quality, **competent knowledge**, there was a tremendous prejudice developing against this in Miller's day, many felt that the whole process of earning both a college and then a seminary education took too long and tended to stifle piety. Most Methodists, for instance, felt that if a man had piety, zeal, a horse and a reasonable familiarity with the Bible, he had all that was required to become a circuit riding minister. Many pointed to the fact that the Apostles had been mostly fishermen as evidence that no formal education was really necessary. To this Miller answered that the Apostles also had something that no modern minister has, namely, the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit. And stated, "Let this inspiration, confirmed as it then was by miracle, be now produced, and we will acknowledge it as more than an adequate substitute for the ordinary method of acquiring knowledge by books and study" (*Sermon Delivered*, 22).

He then explained in detail why learning was so necessary for the minister:

> He is, then, to be ready, on all occasions, to explain the scriptures. This is his first and chief work. That is, not merely to state and support the more simple and elementary doctrines of the gospel; but also to elucidate with clearness the various parts of the sacred volume, whether doctrinal, historical, typical, prophetic, or practical. He is to be ready to rectify erroneous translations of sacred scripture; to reconcile seeming contradictions; to clear up real obscurities; to illustrate the force and beauty of allusions to ancient customs and manners; and, in general, to explain the word of God, as one who has made it the object of his deep and successful study. He is "set for the defense of the gospel" (Phil. 1:17); and, therefore, must be qualified to answer the objections of infidels; to repel the insinuations and cavils of skeptics; to detect, expose, and refute the ever varying forms of heresy; and to give notice, and "stand in the breach" (cf. Ps. 106:23), when men, ever so covertly or artfully, depart from "the faith once delivered to the saints" (cf. Jude 3). He is to be ready to solve the doubts, and satisfy the scruples of conscientious believers; to give instruction to the numerous classes of respectful and serious inquirers; to "reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine" (2 Tim. 4:2). He is to preach the gospel with plainness, dignity, clearness, force, and solemnity. And finally, he is to perform his part in the judicatories of the church, where candidates for the holy ministry are examined and their qualifications ascertained; where a constant inspection is maintained over the faith and order of the church; where the general interests of Zion are discussed and decided; and in conducting the affairs of which, legislative, judicial, and executive proceedings are all combined (*Sermon Delivered*, 23–25).

Miller went on to point out that it was the *most* learned of the Apostles, Paul, who was also the most successful and greatly used by the Lord.

Finally Miller noted that the able minister had to be **active, diligent, and perservering** in the discharge of his multiplied and arduous duties. He warned, "However fervent his piety; however vigorous his native talents;

8. Samuel Miller, *The Sermon Delivered at the Inauguration of the Rev. Archibald Alexander, P. P., As Professor of Didactic and Polemic Theology in the Theological seminary of the Presbyterian church in the United States of America* (New York, 1812), 13–14.

and however ample his acquired knowledge; yet, if he be timid, indolent, wavering, easily driven from the path of duty, or speedily discouraged in his evangelical labors, he does not answer the Apostle's description of a faithful man." (*Sermon Delivered*, 27).

A minister therefore must be a man therefore who "abhors the thought of sitting down in inglorious ease, while thousands are perishing around him" and "whose steady exertion, as well as supreme desire, it is, that the Church may be built up; that souls may be saved; and that Christ in all things may be glorified (1 Peter 4:11)" (*Sermon Delivered*, 28).

I would strongly encourage the reader not to forget the vital importance of these four qualities that Miller emphasized, especially today as we face a real crisis in ministerial education. Once while teaching at a local Bible college attended mostly by people who are already in the ministry, I asked how many members of the class had read the entire bible. *Not a single hand was raised in answer to that question!* Please do not think for a moment this is only a problem outside Reformed circles. In a 2008 interview with White Horse Inn, Bryan Chapell past-President of Covenant Theological Seminary stated that twenty years ago only one-third of incoming Covenant Theological Seminary students failed the Bible exam and had to take an English Bible class. Today close to two-thirds of the incoming class fails the Bible exam and has to start their seminary education with a basic class designed to familiarize them with the English Bible.[9] My experiences on the Candidates Committee of two different presbyteries also do not give me the impression that piety is increasing amongst our candidates. The answers I receive regarding questions about prayer are depressing and exceptions to the Sabbath have become the norm not the exception. And yet, despite this decline, we constantly hear of plans being proposed to further streamline our theological education and make examinations even easier to pass. I wish in this regard we would heed the warning of Miller that, "by introducing into the ministry those who are neither faithful, nor able to teach, judicatories are so far from supplying the needs of the Church, that they rather add to her difficulties, and call her to struggle with new evils. To be in haste to multiply and send out unqualified laborers, is to take the most direct method to send a destructive blast on the garden of God, instead of gathering a rich and smiling harvest" (*Sermon Delivered*, 45).

As part of this inaugural sermon Miller expressed a hope regarding Princeton Theological Seminary that was afterwards to prove prophetic, "It is the beginning, as we trust, of an extensive and permanent system, from which blessings may flow to millions while we are sleeping in the dust" (*Sermon Delivered*, 47).

In May of 1813 when it became clear that another professor was needed at the seminary, it was Miller who was chosen by the church to fill the chair of Ecclesiastical History and Church Government. He was subsequently inducted into office in September of the same year. He served faithfully in that office for thirty six years—until May of 1849 when ill health made it impossible for him to continue. He died the following January, and thus remained "in harness" almost until the very end of his life.

The Pastoral Emphases of Miller's Teaching

While everyone acknowledged that Archibald Alexander was a more gifted preacher, it was Samuel Miller who was Old Princeton's first professor of Homiletics.

In terms of his preaching, Miller's sermons were all composed as written scripts, and during his time in the pulpit in New York he was forced to commit them to memory because at the time there was a strong prejudice amongst the public against ministers who read their sermons. Later after he went to Princeton he was able to bring his manuscripts into the pulpit.[10] There was an advantage incidentally to his always having a written copy of his sermons, namely that they were always available to be edited for publication or enlargement. The core of most of his important books, for instance, was sermons that he had preached at an earlier date. (He always wrote standing up for some reason.) His method of preaching was always very deliberate, solemn, dignified and precise rather than impassioned. William Sprague commented "his discourses were decidedly superior to his manner of delivering them" (*Annals*, 604).

Although he was very eloquent himself, he counseled his students "lay much more stress, and to place unspeakably more reliance, on the efficacy of pure truth, and the promise of his God" (*Life of Miller*, vol. 2.54). He

9. "What Do You Think About the State of Today's Church?", White Horse Inn video, 2008, available online at: http://youtube/o6y6ZXl57DY.

10. "His sermons were generally written, but in the earlier periods of his ministry, as I have heard him say, were almost always committed to memory,—as the prejudice against reading in New York was so great, that it was at the peril at least of one's reputation as a preacher that he ventured to lay his manuscript before him. At a later period, however, especially after he went to Princeton, he generally read his discourses, but he read with so much ease and freedom, that, but for the turning over of the leaves, one would scarcely have been aware that he was reading at all." *Annals of the American Presbyterian Pulpit*, 603.

had another wonderful quality as an instructor, namely "his keenest criticisms were given with all the gentle kindness of a father" (*Life of Miller* 2.410). His students reported that not only were his critiques informative and useful, but enjoyable. When you ask the question, how many men enjoy critiques of their preaching you get a sense of just how good an instructor he was!

Incidentally, a good place to find some of Miller's excellent advice on preaching to his students may be found in his *Letters on Clerical Manners and Habits*. Admittedly, some of the advice is dated, by there are many gems such as his advice to "Go from Your Knees to the Pulpit: The more thoroughly your mind is steeped, if I may be allowed the expression, in the spirit of prayer, and of communion with God, when you ascend the sacred desk, the more easy and delightful will it be to preach ; the more rich and spiritual will your preaching be; the more fervent and natural your eloquence; and the greater the probability that what you say will be made a blessing. Be assured, my dear young Friend, after all the rules and instructions which have been given on the subject of *pulpit eloquence,*—and which in their place have great value—that which unspeakably outweighs all the rest in importance, is, that you go to the sanctuary with a heart full of your subject; warmed with love to your Master, and to immortal souls; remembering too, that the eye of that Master is upon you ; and that of the sermon which you are about to deliver, you must soon give an account before his judgment seat."[11]

While Miller refused calls to become the pastor of congregations in the Princeton area, he did not stop preaching. James Carnahan, who later went on to become the President of Princeton University, records: "When his services were not required in the Seminary, or College, or Church in Princeton, he would frequently ride to some neighbouring congregation, and volunteer his services, which were always acceptable both to the pastor and to the people," (*Annals*, 608). It is possible that people today might not understand this, but we need to remember that at the time there were no phones, and that this would be roughly the equivalent of having someone like Sinclair Ferguson show up unannounced on Sunday morning offering to preach for your congregation. I can't claim to speak for other pastors but this one certainly wouldn't say no to such an offer!

We might consider another pastoral emphasis of Miller's life was controversy. He was frequently called upon to engage in polemical and controversial disputations, and at various points wrote letters, essays, articles, and even books against the errors of Unitarians, Congregationalists, and Episcopalians. During the New School/Old School Controversy Miller often wrote opposing the views of men of his own denomination who were allied with the New School. Today, many Presbyterians view controversial and polemical writing as divisive, unnecessary, and quite possibly in bad taste. Many believe that there is no thorny theological problem that couldn't be solved either with a phone call, a hug, or just by minding your own business. Samuel Miller, although irenic by nature, would not have agreed with such a viewpoint. He saw controversy as a necessary part of the life of the church and wrote the following in his book, *The Primitive and Apostolical Order of the Church of Christ Vindicated:*

> … the truth ever has been, and, as long as this militant state continues, ever must be maintained by controversy. The church, in this conflict, may be compared to persons striving to ascend an agitated and rapid river, when the wind and the tide are both strong against them. They can advance only by hard rowing; and the moment they intermit their efforts they fall down the stream. The church has to fight for every inch of ground; and whenever she ceases to contend for the truth, she ceases to advance. She may contend with an improper spirit. If she does this, it is her mistake and her sin. But to contend no more, is to disregard the command of her Master in heaven, and betray his cause to the enemy.[12]

If we have much to learn from Miller in terms of the importance of controversy, we have even more to learn about how to go about engaging in it. James Carnahan stated that when it came to controversial writings:

> … he stated in a perspicuous manner the teachings of the Bible, and met what he regarded the prevailing errors of the day, with the courtesy of a Christian gentleman. In this respect he may be considered as a model controversialist. He never substitutes personal abuse of an opponent for argument in refutation of his doctrines. While he states with all fullness, and maintains by fair argument, what he believes to be the truth, he never attempts to render ridiculous or odious those who hold different opinions" (*Annals*, 607).

It would be very wrong to write of the work of Samuel Miller and not comment on what is perhaps his most

11. Samuel Miller, *Letters on Clerical Manners and Habits: Addressed to a Student in the Theological Seminary, at Princeton, N.J.* (New York, 1827), 308–309.

12. Samuel Miller, *The Primitive and Apostolical Order of the Church of Christ Vindicated* (Philadelphia, 1840), 7.

well-known work today, *An Essay on the Warrant, Nature, and Duties of the Office of the Ruling Elder*. Those readers who are members of the OPC will be glad to hear that Miller was a three office man, that is he believed that the offices of teaching and ruling elder were distinct, and often as I have read his defense of the three office view, I have had to say *"almost thou persuadest me to be a three office man."* *The Ruling Elder* was so influential that during the 19th century it was widely read in Scotland and actually did much to restore the importance of the office of elder in that country. It did however precipitate a lengthy controversy with the Southern Presbyterians who argued that elder was actually one office with two types, Ruling and Teaching. They also argued that Ruling Elders should lay hands on Pastors when they were ordained, and that they were necessary for forming a quorum of Presbytery. Miller argued in print against both of these views.

In his controversy with the Episcopalians, who did not believe in the office of ruling elder at all, Miller had pointed out that this office was of Apostolic institution and that, the book of Acts records that they ordained elders, plural, in every church, small as well as great, and that this could not possibly be referring to a plurality of Ministers. "The idea," wrote Miller, "that it was considered as necessary, at such a time, that every Church should have two, three, or four Pastors, or Ministers, in the modern popular sense of those terms, is manifestly altogether inadmissible. But if a majority of these Elders, whatever their ordination or authority might be, were in fact employed, not in teaching, but in ruling, all difficulty vanishes at once."[13]

He also defended the necessity of these Ruling Elders, not only to provide a check to the power of pastors, but also for the well-being of pastors by arguing that without Ruling Elders, Pastors could not possibly perform all the duties that are required of them:

> Now the question is, by whom shall all these multiplied, weighty and indispensable services be performed? Besides the arduous work of public instruction and exhortation, who shall attend to all the numberless and ever-recurring details of inspection, warning and visitation, which are so needful in every Christian community? Will any say, it is the duty of the pastor of each Church to perform them all? The very suggestion is absurd. It is physically impossible for him to do it. He cannot be every where, and know everything. He cannot perform what is expected from him, and at the same time so watch over his whole flock as to fulfil [*sic*] every duty which the interest of the Church demands. He must "give himself to reading;" he must prepare for the services of the pulpit; he must discharge his various public labors; he must employ much time in private, in instructing and counselling [*sic*] those who apply to him for instruction and advice; and he must act his part in the concerns of the whole Church with which he is connected. Now, is it practicable for any man, however diligent and active, to do all this, and at the same time to perform the whole work of inspection and government over a congregation of the ordinary size! We might as well expect and demand any impossibility; and impossibilities the great and merciful Head of the Church requires of no man (*Essay on the Warrant*, 176).

This is a truth that I can testify to by experience, and it seems clear that the decline of the office of Ruling Elder is one of the reasons we've seen Programs, hired counselors, and small groups taking the place of active shepherding in the modern church.

Intimately related to that work of shepherding is something else that is rapidly disappearing from the church, but which was stressed by Miller in his work on the Ruling Elder, namely the necessity of the regular pastoral visitation of the members of the flock:

> It is the duty of ruling elders, also, to visit the members of the church and their families—with the pastor, if he requests it, without him, if he does not—to converse with them; to instruct the ignorant; to confirm the wavering; to caution the unwary; to reclaim the wandering; to encourage the timid; and to excite and animate all classes to a faithful and exemplary discharge of duty. It is incumbent on them to consult frequently and freely with their pastor on the interests of the flock committed to their charge; to aid him in forming and executing plans for the welfare of the church; to give him, from time to time, such information as he may need to enable him to perform aright his various and momentous duties; to impart to him, with affectionate respect, their advice; to support him with their influence; to defend his reputation; to enforce his just admonitions; and, in a word, by every means in their power, to promote the comfort and extend the usefulness of his labours (*Essay on the Warrant*, 204).

Incidentally, if we wonder why piety is at such low ebb, the answer might just be that we have a tendency to choose Ruling Elders who are able administrators or

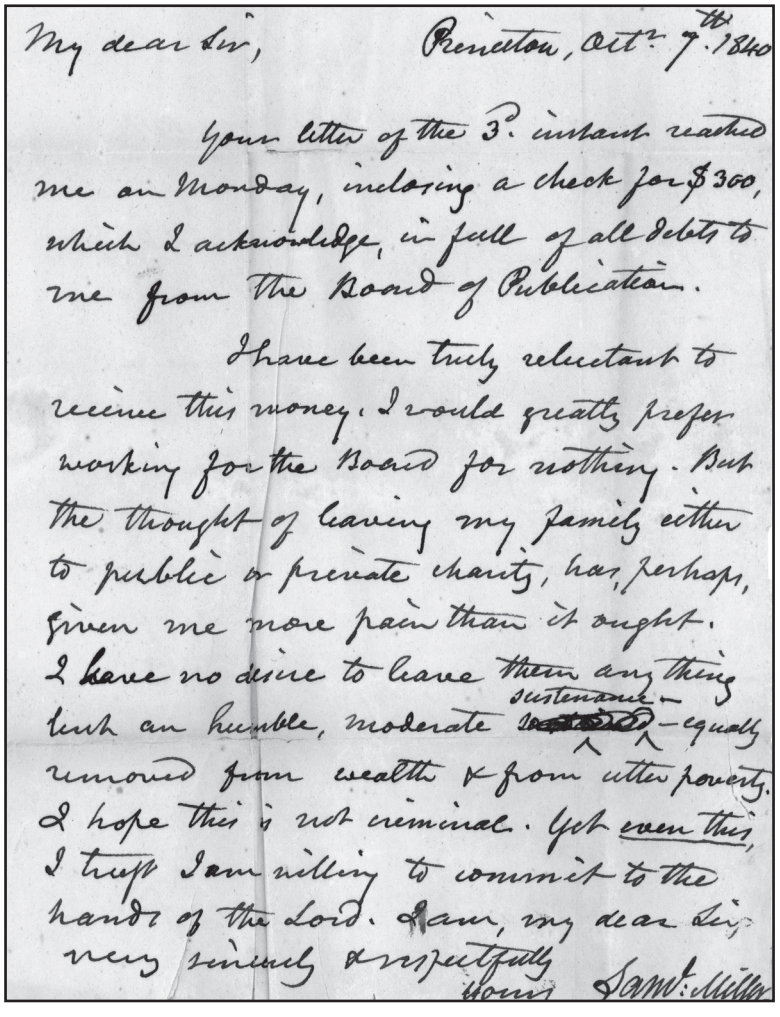
13. Samuel Miller, *An Essay on the Warrant, Nature, and Duties of the Office of the Ruling Elder* (New York, 1832), 54.

who are popular, but not pious men. Miller warned: "we have no reason to expect, in general, that the piety of the mass of members in any church will rise much higher than that of their rulers and guides. Where the latter are either lifeless formalists or, at best, but "babes in Christ" (1 Cor. 3:1), we shall rarely find many under their care of more vitality or of superior stature" (*Warrant*, 255).

Conclusion

I was privileged to recently hear Joseph Pipa, the President of Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, speaking on the initial plan for the seminary and his dreams for the future, and I could not help but notice the similarities between what Dr. Pipa was saying and what Miller had said at the inauguration of Archibald Alexander. With that hope that Dr. Pipa shared in mind, it seems appropriate if I close with the charge delivered by Samuel Miller 200 years ago in his inaugural sermon:

> When I cast an eye down the ages of eternity, and think how important is the salvation of a single soul; when I recollect how important, of course, the office of a minister of the gospel, who may be the happy instrument of saving many hundreds, or thousands of souls; and when I remember how many and how momentous are the relations, which a Seminary intended solely for training up ministers, bears to all the interests of men, in the life that now is, and especially in that which is to come; I feel as if the task of conducting such a Seminary, had an awfulness of responsibility connected with it, which is enough to make us tremble! O my fathers and brethren! Let it never be said of us, on whom this task has fallen, that we take more pains to make polite scholars, eloquent orators, or men of mere learning, than to form able and faithful ministers of the New Testament. Let it never be said, that we are more anxious to maintain the literary and scientific honors of the ministry, than we are to promote that honor which consists in being full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and the instruments of adding much people to the Lord. The eyes of the church are upon us. The eyes of the angels, and, above all, the eyes of the King of Zion, are upon us. May we have grace given us to be faithful!" (*Sermon Delivered*, 49). ▪



My dear Sir, Princeton, Oct. 7th 1840

Your letter of the 3d. instant reached me on Monday, inclosing a check for $300, which I acknowledge, in full of all debts to me from the Board of Publication.

I have been truly reluctant to receive this money. I would greatly prefer working for the Board for nothing. But the thought of leaving my family either to public or private charity, has, perhaps, given me more pain than it ought. I have no desire to leave them anything but an humble, moderate sustenance — equally removed from wealth & from utter poverty. I hope this is not criminal. Yet even this, I trust I am willing to commit to the hands of the Lord. I am, my dear Sir, very sincerely & respectfully yours Saml: Miller

In Brief: **Letter from Dr. Samuel Miller to Dr. A. W. Mitchell,** Treasurer of the Presbyterian Board of Publication, October 7, 1840, from a private collection. "Princeton, Oct. 7th 1840. My dear sir, Your letter of the 3d. instant reached me on Monday, inclosing a check for $300, which I acknowledge, in full of all debts to me from the Board of Publication. I have been truly reluctant to receive this money. I would greatly prefer working for the Board for nothing. But the thought of leaving my family either to public or private charity, has, perhaps given me more pain than it ought. I have no desire to leave them anything but an humble, moderate sustenance—equally removed from wealth & from utter poverty. I hope this is not criminal. Yet even this, I trust I am willing to commit to the hands of the Lord. I am, my dear sir, very sincerely respectfully yours, Saml: Miller. ▪