

The Changing Scene and the Unchanging Word

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Secrecy and Misrepresentation in a General Assembly's Commission and in Philadelphia Presbytery



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ON MARCH 2, 1936, there was railroaded through the Presbytery of Philadelphia a motion approving in principle a report of the General Assembly's Special Commission to visit the Presbyteries of Philadelphia and Chester.

This was accomplished by a coalition between the "middle-of-the-road" or evangelical-in-fair-weather element in the presbytery with the beligerently Modernist element.

A typical representative of the middle-of-the-road element was the Moderator, Rev. Warren R. Ward, D.D., who, despite the fact that he has usually in the past been regarded as a member of the evangelical party in the presbytery, actually appointed a signer of the Modernist "Auburn Affirmation" as a member of the all-important committee which is to suggest definite measures to put the provisions of the Report into effect.

What does the Report of the Commission, thus approved by the presbytery, really stand for? Let us strip off the superficial trappings of piety in which this wickedness is clothed, and look the thing in the face.

Five ugly words give the answer. I do not like to use ugly words, but ugly words must be used to describe an ugly thing. Those ugly words are Misrepresentation, Unbelief, Secrecy, Tyranny, Lawlessness.

I. Misrepresentation

In the first part of the Report, the Commission creates the general impression that during its sessions it gave an adequate hearing to all points of view and merely did not hear three individuals, who would not consent to take the pledge of secrecy that the Commission imposed. It does not men-

tion the fact that one of those individuals was the Rev. H. McAllister Griffiths, representing a very distinct group in the Presbytery of Philadelphia. It does not mention the fact that Mr. Griffiths, after being refused a hearing except on the terms of secrecy, was not even permitted to present a written statement for the group of which he was a member. It also does not mention the fact that no member of The Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions in the Presbytery of Philadelphia was heard. Therefore the impression made by this Report that the Commission gave an adequate hearing to all points of view is a misleading impression. To make such a misleading impression is *Misrepresentation*.

II. Unbelief

In Philadelphia Presbytery there are ten signers of the Modernist "Auburn Affirmation." The Auburn Affirmation is a document expressing the point of view of unbelief. This Report, by the plainest implication, endorses the presence of signers of the Affirmation in the presbytery and the placing of them in positions of leadership. To endorse unbelief is itself unbelief. Therefore the Report stands for *Unbelief*.

III. Secrecy

The Report advocates secret sessions of the presbytery and suggests such a policy as would really give only the presbyterial machine the right to make public its version of what takes place in the presbytery meetings. It seeks to deprive the rank and file of the Church of its right to know what its representatives in presbytery do. Thus it stands for *Secrecy*.

IV. Tyranny

The Report advocates disciplinary action against those who exercise the right of assembly to discuss the affairs of the presbytery. It calls the exercise of such a right of assembly "caucuses" and actually allows itself to speak of it as "political trickery." The right of assembly is absolutely essential to all liberty in church or in state. To deny such a right, as well as to deny the right of free speech (see III above) is *Tyranny*.

V. Lawlessness

The Report advocates a rotary system of election of Commissioners to the General Assembly. Thus it advocates the choice of Commissioners on the ground that they have not been to the Assembly before. The principle of government embodied in the Constitution of the Church plainly contemplates their election on the ground of fitness and because they represent, in the issues before the Church, the will of the majority of presbytery. Thus the law of the Church has at the heart of it the principle of representative government. In discouraging representative government, as well as in doing the other things that we have already mentioned, the Report stands for *Lawlessness*.

Who Are Guilty?

The misrepresentation, unbelief, secrecy, tyranny, and lawlessness of this Report are shared in by every member of the Commission, and also by every member of presbytery who voted to railroad the action through the meeting on March 2, 1936. No doubt some were more guilty than others. Some may partly be excused on the ground that they were ignorant of what was being done. But even such ignorance is guilt. All who engaged in this proceeding were guilty. Guilt is personal. It is not our part, or the part of any man, to judge; but if a man fears God he should fear to engage in wickedness like that which is being practised by the ecclesiastical machine in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.

Some men in the presbytery do fear God. They fear Him far more than all the ecclesiastical threatenings breathed out by this lawless Commission of the General Assembly and by the subservient Presbytery of Philadelphia. They will never consent to conceal the facts; they will never make common cause with unbelief; they will never consent to secrecy in the affairs of the Church; they will never trample upon liberty; they will never connive at lawlessness. These men fear God more than they fear men. There are such men even now in Philadelphia Presbytery.