



THE TESTIMONY OF AMERICAN PRESBYTERIANISM

On the Duty of Church Membership

“Although great caution and tenderness ought to be exercised toward those whose withdrawing from Christian privileges may be occasioned by the unavoidable dispensations of Providence, without any material fault of their own, yet in all cases, in which a church Session has good reason to believe that any of the church-members under their care have absented themselves with design, either from a disregard of Christian privileges or from a wish to escape from the inspection and discipline of the church, they ought, without unnecessary delay, to declare such persons suspended from the privileges of the church until they give evidence of repentance and reformation.” [MGA (1825), p. 255; cited in Roberts, *Manual For Ruling Elders* (1905), p. 151-151.]

“1. Every church member is amenable to some appropriate tribunal, by the wisdom and fidelity of which, in case of his falling into any error, immorality, or negligence, he may be dealt with according to the word of God.

“2. No member of a church can properly ever cease to be such but by death, exclusion, a regular dismissal, or an orderly withdrawing to join some other Christian denomination; and must of necessity, continue to be amenable to that church until he becomes regularly connected with another.” [MGA (1825), p. 256; Baird (1855), p. 58.]

In 1848 the General Assembly refused to adopt a recommendation that “members of Churches may voluntarily withdraw”. [MGA (1848), p. 24; Baird (1855), p. 61.]

“*Resolved*, That in the opinion of this Assembly there is no constitutional or scriptural mode of separating members from the communion of the Church, except by death, by dismissal to join another Church, or by discipline. . . .” [MGA (1851), p. 33; Baird (1855), p. 61.]

In 1854 the Old School General Assembly upheld a decision censuring a man for “absenting himself from public worship on account of disagreement with his pastor.” [MGA (1854), p. 44.]

In 1859 the Old School General Assembly upheld a decision suspending one from “the communion of the Church, on the charge of a wilful absenting himself from the ordinances of

God's house for the space of a year and a half. . . ." The grounds given for upholding the action of the lower court were:

"First. Because the conduct charged, if the appellant was justly chargeable with such conduct, was a high offence.

"Second. Because it was openly acknowledged in court by the appellant, that he was chargeable with the offense charged; and this was not denied by any party." [MGA, (1859), pp. 546-547.]

In 1865 the Presbytery of Sidney asked the Assembly to determine if "... it is consistent with regular standing in our church, for church-members to be supporters and attendants in other churches not of our communion, while absenting themselves from and refusing to support the church to which they belong?" The Old School Assembly answered the question in the negative, "with an injunction on church Sessions to make such cases a matter of discipline." [MGA (1865), p. 537, see also William Moore, ed., *The Presbyterian Digest*, 1907, p. 666.]

"May a member's name be erased at his request?"

"There are but three ways in which the name of a person can be removed from the roll of a church. These are by death, by dismissal to another church and by the administration of discipline. . . ." [citing MGA (1878), p. 58]. [J. A. Hodge, *What is Presbyterian Law . . . ?* (1882), pp. 155-156.]

"Being subject to the jurisdiction of the Church, they [members or officers] cannot cast off that jurisdiction at will without sinning against the Church. And she may surrender her jurisdiction only in the way of censure by excommunication or deposition, or in the way of correcting a mistake made by both her and the person, as in demission, or in the way of fraternal recognition of some other Church by dismissal thereto. But no one may quit this Church without thereby violating his covenant with it, except with her consent; nor is she permitted to give her consent, except when transferring to some other Church of Christ. . . ." [F.P. Ramsay, *Exposition of the Form of Government* (1889), p. 264.]

"1. The visible Church is a divine institution. In one sense indeed it is a voluntary society, in so far as that no man can be coerced to join it. If he joins it at all, it must be of his own free will. Nevertheless it is the will of God that the visible Church as an organized body should exist; and every man who hears the Gospel, is bound to enroll himself among its members and to submit to its authority.

"2. All Church power is of God, and all legitimate Church officers are his ministers. They act in his name and by his authority. Resistance to them, therefore, is resistance to the ordinance of God." [Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, (1873): III:360.]

“Dislike for a minister or officers, not in accord with the management of the church, or dislike for any of its officers and members do not justify a member in not attending the services of the sanctuary. . . . When members do not attend the services because of dislike of either minister, officers, etc., and do not attend the Lord’s Supper, this is always an offense. In such a case the Session should proceed according to the requirements of the Rules of Discipline.” [MGA1897, p. 42; cited in Leslie, *Presbyterian Law . . . in the PCUS*, (1930), p. 59]

The matter of willful neglect of the duties of membership is treated in the chapter on “Cases Without Full Judicial Process” in the PCUSA *Book of Discipline*, 1937: “Chpt. VII. 4. Suspension of Resident Church Members.—Any resident church member who shall persistently absent himself from the ordinances of the church for two years in a manner to be regarded as a serious injury to the cause of religion may, after diligent effort has been made by the session to restore him to active fulfillment of his membership, and he has been duly notified of its intention, be suspended from the communion of the Church until he shall satisfy the session of the propriety of his restoration.”

“b. *Removing names from the communicant roll.* Names are removed from a communicant roll:

(1) By death.

(2) By certificate of dismission to another church, which church must be in good standing in an evangelical denomination. . . .

(3) By discipline, “in cases of process.” that is to say, by conviction on evidence in a formal trial. . . .

(4) By discipline, “in cases without full process.” that is to say, by Sessional action without formal trial. . . . (d) A resident communicant neglecting the ordinances of the Church for two years, may be suspended from the communion of the Church until evidence of repentance is given. (e) If a resident communicant persistently absents himself from the ordinance of religion, the Session may place his name upon the roll of suspended members. . . .” [Mudge and Finney. *Manual For Church Officers . . . of the PCUSA*. 5th ed. (1934), pp. 67-68.]

“Under the polity governing membership in the Presbyterian Church, U.S., the Session should be able to account for every individual who has ever been a member of the church. All members, once received, remain on the roll of the church until notice has been received that they have been received by some other church, or until it becomes definitely known that affiliation with some other church has been established.” [P.J. Garrison, Jr., *Presbyterian Polity and Procedures*, (1953), p. 38.]

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