

Power for Missions Restored

Thornwell, Hodge, and the PCA's Mission to the World

An unpublished paper by Phil DeHart – 6 March, 2019

Since the early 19th Century the American church has largely taken for granted the necessity and legitimacy of mission agencies, both church and para-church. By the mid 20th Century they were as firmly entrenched as any feature of American church life.

But a surprising déjà-vu moment occurred during the 1973 formation of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). The voices of the Boards Controversy, dead for 100 years, briefly came back to life. And it was the loser's voice which was heard more loudly than the winner's.

There are some compelling threads which connect the PCA's founding of Mission to the World (MTW) to the voice from this losing corner of the ring. Did our founding fathers heed the right voice?

Boards in the Dock

Christ's Power

Charles Hodge and James H. Thornwell represent the two corners in The Boards Controversy (1840-1860).¹ Never before or since have American Presbyterians – or possibly Christians anywhere - wrestled so carefully with questions concerning how the Church's mission should be organized and executed.²

Hodge argued that Foreign Mission Boards could belong to the Church without being part of the Church. It was the best of both worlds: Church access (for funds and recruits) and a general oversight, without the attendant risk of churches controlling a work they didn't understand.

Thornwell argued that, in order for the Church to properly bring all of its resources to bear upon the Great Commission, Foreign Mission Boards would need to be part of the Church, under the Church's authority.

A fundamental question was beginning to emerge: Where does vitality for missions come from?

¹ The PCA's Historical Society has provided a valuable service by collecting an array of resources summarizing this controversy and making them accessible. To go one step further, I think it would be immensely valuable to the church for Kenneth J Foreman's dissertation on this topic to be published. See <http://www.pcahistory.org/documents/boarddebates/> I will not attempt to duplicate any of this work but rather provide an analysis. For a very capable counter-analysis see Alan D. Strange, "2001 Preface to Charles Hodge's The Church and Its Polity," -*Am. J. Theol.* 13 (2002): 25-37. <http://www.midamerica.edu/uploads/files/pdf/journal/13-strange.pdf>

² "They went on to make the clearest expositions yet recorded in Christian history of the theoretical and practical problems inherent in undertaking extensive Christian work . . ." This comment from the late scholar probably most intimately familiar with the controversy, its players, and the historical context. Kenneth J Foreman, "The Debate on the Administration of Missions Led by James Henley Thornwell in the Presbyterian Church 1839-1861" (PhD Dissertation, Princeton University, 1977). xxxvi.

At root, the Boards Controversy had to do with church power – the authority of Christ in His Church. On one side (Hodge), church power is only concerned with doctrine and worship. On the other side (Thornwell), it is concerned with the Church as a whole – including the Great Commission.

The two sides could have happily negotiated a truce and co-existed were it not for Thornwell's insistence that church power is organic. Many of us (and not only the engineers) tend to have a *mechanical* rather than an *organic* notion of church power. In a machine, power moves from the engine through a transmission mechanism to the wheels.³ In an organism, power is mysteriously resident in every part inseparably from the power that is resident in the whole. Life in one cell is the same life that is in the organism. Thornwell argued that church power, being organic, is resident in the body as a whole – ruled and rulers together. The administration of the power does not *support* the organism but rather *is part of* the organism.⁴ Now to the point: an organic system is exclusive. A mechanical system can have replaceable semi-autonomous power sources, transmissions, and applications. By contrast, an organic system operates as a whole. A limb is either connected and alive or disconnected and dead. If connected, it functions harmoniously.

Unfortunately, what this means for truce is that at root the organic cannot tolerate the mechanical and the mechanical cannot tolerate the organic. The two cannot co-exist in the same system.

Hodge thought mechanically. Thornwell thought organically. He wanted to see the Great Work of foreign missions as the organic limb of the Church tapped directly into the Spiritual power available in every member and every court.

Thornwell's concern was that as long as foreign missions was contracted out to an agency the organic connection between church and mission would be cut; that there could be no flow at all of Spiritual power from Christ to an organization that is not the Church.

Advantage/Disadvantage

The obvious advantage on Thornwell's side was a coherent approach to Christ's authority and Christ's administration; to worshipping God and gathering/perfecting worshippers. The Church as a whole and in all of its activity is either God-given or man-made. When Christ gave the Great Commission to the Church he also gave the Church the equipment to fulfill it. If Presbyterianism is functional for the settled church but inadequate for her mission then it is an unbiblical system and needs to be disposed of most urgently. In essence, Thornwell argued that the same principles that had guided the mission of the Apostolic Church were applicable now. He argued that the burden was on Hodge to justify the need for a new structure.

That is not at all how Hodge's colleagues in the North tended to see things.

³ Hodge's view is of course more nuanced, but I think this model is the inevitable consequence of the manner in which he distinguishes the visible from the invisible church.

⁴ This is the logic of Paul's argument in Eph 4:4-7 as he moves from a fundamental organic unity to a distinction of gifts. The power in every gift is the power in the organic whole. Against this, and following Hodge, "vine" and "trellis" has become a popular model for thinking about the Church's mission. For all of its helpful observations it is mistaken, in my view, in how it distinguishes the word-ministry of the church as organic "vine" and the structural aspects of ministry as inorganic "trellis". Colin Marshall and Tony Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine: The Ministry Mind-Shift That Changes Everything* (Matthias Media, 2009).

Contemporary culture was solidly on Hodge's side. His position seemed generous. It seemed congenial. It seemed open minded. And it was entrenched. Already for several decades the Protestant church's mission had been promoted and executed by Societies - with their governing boards - rather than by the Church. This trend began in Britain and spread rapidly in America. For example, the missionary Haystack Revival in New England (beginning in 1806) led directly to the founding of a Society in 1810 - the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM). By the 30's, Societies were the new normal. To most of his contemporaries, Thornwell's arguments seemed to be the innovation, not Hodge's. And the innovator is never in a happy place in an Old School Presbyterian church!

In 1840 Thornwell set out to reclaim the church's mission.⁵ His concern was not how foreign missions is to be *controlled* but how it is to be *invigorated*. In other words, his first concern was not with the leadership, structure, or even with the doctrinal integrity of the existing work but rather with its *vitality*. As long as foreign missions was to remain the purview of an organization it could not be the responsibility of the Church. It was the privilege and the dignity of this Great Work which was at stake. And the authoritative call to action in this Great Work must be the voice of Christ himself!

Points of Conflict

Conflict emerged around a few critical issues:

1. Does a church possess the authority to set up an organization to carry out her mission?

Hodge: Yes. God's command to do missions implicitly legitimizes that which is necessary for its accomplishment. Common sense shows that boards are necessary – thus legitimate. Since the Church's doctrine and worship are not at stake, the Church should organize her mission in the most expeditious manner. Boards have a proven track record – thus the only appropriate structure.

Thornwell: No. The Church has no authority to establish any government other than what is prescribed in Scripture. The Church herself is commissioned and cannot delegate. It is not only illogical but dangerous to argue from necessity in spiritual matters.

2. More precisely, according to Calvin's and Owen's *Regulative Principle*, does the Church's mission constitute a "circumstance" or an "element"?

Hodge: Circumstance. It has no bearing on doctrine or worship. There is no Scriptural data that legislates the operation or management of missions.

Thornwell: Both. While the Church's mission is not of its essence, it is the "great end of our Church's organization and the indispensable condition of her Lord's promised presence." There is ample Scriptural data if you observe the Confessional principle of "good and necessary consequence." Not all aspects of missions belong to what is "elemental". There is within missions both "circumstance" and "element". But even "circumstance" is not man-made - it must be "according to the general rules of the word, which are always to be observed."

3. Is the Church the missionary society?

Hodge: No. The churches must support and contribute (personnel and finances) to her missionary society.⁶

⁵ Hodge did not actually personally enter the debate for over another decade.

⁶ In the case of the New/Old School controversy Hodge had argued "every Church ought to consider herself as a Missionary Society." But now, fighting on a different front he would use different arguments. A Craig Troxel, "Charles Hodge on Church Boards: A Case Study in Ecclesiology," *Westminst. Theol. J.* 58.2 (1996): 202.

Thornwell: Yes. The Church constitutes the missionary society and every church member is necessarily a member of this great society. Each member and each church body is thus under direct obligation to Christ's Great Commission with no organization standing in-between.

4. For the work of foreign missions where is church power located?

Hodge: In General Assembly, the highest court. This court represents the unified work of the whole Church.

Thornwell: In each church body but especially in Sessions and Presbyteries. Only these courts possess church power most central to her mission - to ordain officers, commission missionaries, and organize churches. The diaconate also has a critical administrative role.

5. Is a hierarchical structure legitimate for the Church's mission?

Hodge: Yes. Because the Board is not part of the Church it should be structured according to expediency.

Thornwell: No. Church power is in her courts. In the context of ecclesiastical function one Elder should not have authority over another.

6. Is opposition to the church's board of foreign missions permitted?

Hodge: No. The board is the appointed authority of the General Assembly and, while discussion may be tolerated for a period of time, dissent is subversive.

Thornwell: Absolutely. The only way for the Church to know God's will concerning missions is to have an open discussion which challenges the status quo in light of Scripture. Liberty of conscience entails free speech.

7. Is your opponent's position a "high church" position?

Hodge: Yes. My opponent wants all the power vested in the church courts. These courts are dominated by clergy. Boards are mostly laypeople and thus able to protect the mission operation from bumbling or ambitious pastors.

Thornwell: Yes. My opponent wants the General Assembly to be able to do as it pleases, even if that means imposing an extra-biblical structure on the Church. He does not allow the lower courts (or the offices of Ruling Elder and Deacon) any key role in the Church's foreign mission.

8. Are you able to cooperate with non-Presbyterian churches in the work of foreign missions?

Hodge: Of course! That was the genius of the ABCFM, for example. It allowed Presbyterians, Calvinist Congregationalists, and Dutch Reformed to work together on the mission field. As long as we share a common Reformed theology we can work together to establish churches in foreign lands.

Thornwell: Yes, but there are limits. We will enjoy true fellowship with all churches that belong to Christ but the extent of co-laboring will be limited by the focus of the work. We will establish Presbyterian churches and we can only do so with integrity as Presbyterians.

9. Lastly, what is the key to success for the missionary enterprise?

Hodge: A talented executive. Missions is a sophisticated machine that must manage a thousand details. It requires intelligent technicians to keep it running and winsome agents to keep the funds flowing. Thus the key is the man at the top who must capably manage.

Thornwell: A faithful church. Missions is quite simple because it is essentially a Spiritual enterprise. It requires no more machinery than that provided Spiritually by local church and presbytery. As for the details, those are incidental. The missionaries themselves are most capable of the myriad decisions related to the field. And funding is a diaconal concern that can be managed in a variety of

ways – as long as it is the local church that is supporting the missionaries they are sending. In summary, if each part is doing its job then the GA Committee's work is not so complex.⁷

The mantra characteristic of the controversy takes a moment to explain:

Hodge: The Church is free - *she may do anything that is not prohibited in Scripture*. Since church boards are not prohibited, the Church is free to create them.

Thornwell: The Church is bound – *she may only do what is prescribed in Scripture*. Since church boards are not prescribed they are not legitimate.

Hodge's view sounds like greater freedom . . . but freedom for whom? He was advocating for freedom for General Assembly and not for freedom for the Church as a whole. In American politics we encounter a similar idea. More freedom for the federal government to enact policies likely means less freedom for state and other institutions (including families). More restrictions on the federal government usually means more freedom for other institutions.

Thornwell's organic understanding of church power maintained a high view of Christian Liberty (WCF 20). If Christian freedom is sacred then it is the duty of the Church to ensure that the Christian's conscience is bound only to the Scriptures. This proscribes strict limits around the authority of the Church. The Church must produce positive warrant from Scripture to say anything. If this was the case for any court of the Church, how much more for the highest court of the Church.

The cost of autonomy, Thornwell argued, is the vitality of Christ's kingly presence.

There was a certain precision to these arguments. The two sides of the debate had a great deal in common. They were all Old Schoolers committed to the Westminster Confession and to Presbyterianism. They had fought side by side against the New Schoolers to defeat the *Plan of Union* and external Boards. It was precisely the new system - church-appointed boards - over which they differed. Perhaps a bit of historical background will aid us at this point.

How it Began

Controversy over the *Plan of Union*, the joint mission work of Presbyterians and Congregationalists, raged in the Presbyterian Church for 30 years, exposing a range of conflicts between conservatives and progressives. One of the most significant issues that surfaced and split the two parties cleanly down the line was the legitimacy of the closely affiliated volunteer missionary societies. Finally, in 1837, a small conservative majority buried the *Plan of Union*. Out of this death the denominational Board of Foreign Missions was born.

The termination of the *Plan of Union* led to the immediate exclusion from the Presbyterian Church of all the presbyteries that had been formed under the *Plan*. Roughly half of her entire membership was excised by a single action. A much smaller and relatively unified body was left to wrestle with how the Board of Foreign Missions should function. Generally, Princeton and the North sided with Charles

⁷ This is precisely the point upon which Hodge's pragmatism hammered. Boards are necessary because the Church was not doing its job. Thornwell replied that this was analogous to how to deal with poor parenting. Does a pastor tell bad parents in the congregation to give their children up for adoption? Or does he instruct and motivate them with the gospel?

Hodge (1797-1878) of Boston and the South sided with James H. Thornwell (1812-1862) of South Carolina.

The conflict within the Old School Presbyterian church began when Thornwell made a presentation to the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia in 1840. He found himself up against Thomas Smyth, an influential and articulate northerner who stridently defended the church's newly formed Board of Foreign Missions.⁸ The will of God was clearly manifest on the floor of Synod that year and Thornwell was defeated. The issue was now out in the open and Thornwell's argument was published. Smyth submitted a review of Thornwell's article which was published in three installments. Thornwell responded to Smyth and the opposing positions were laid out for the public to consider. That is roughly how the battle was joined.

More significant than all of this Presbyterian history is what was happening in Christian society at large. Presbyterians did not live in a bubble. On the heels of religious revival there was a flurry of activity of "benevolent societies". Religious fervor in the Second Great Awakening meant - perhaps even more than faithful church involvement - social and religious activism. Mission work among the heathen was increasingly the most noble form of activism. Every established church found itself in the - sometimes awkward - position of trying to capitalize on this energy. Likewise, the Presbyterian church faced the challenge of catching up with free market religion in America. It was under this pressure that the conversation began.

Only an intramural controversy was capable of delving into this level of theological detail. It could not have taken place a decade earlier, for example, when the Presbyterian Church was chiefly occupied with New Haven Theology and para-church Societies. The discussion could only happen on this level within the confines of Old-school, Reformed, Westminster-Confession-of-Faith, missions-loving, Presbyterians.

Gospel Government?

Thornwell believed Presbyterianism held the answer to missions vitality. Presbyterianism is a faith revealed in Holy Scripture with Spiritual energy. Any alternative is a man-made religion with human energies. It was that simple.

Hodge seemed to view Christ as an absentee King. In the work of kingdom expansion the Church was left to labor as best she can according to her own devices. Like CS Lewis' Aslan who would send emissaries from time to time to his tortured Narnia, Christ reserves his own reign for the Last Battle. Thornwell's reading of Scripture allowed for no such absenteeism. Such a Christ cannot save now. Rather, Christ reigns in the present from Zion, the visible Church, and he does so directly by his own Word and Spirit. It is by His own power and His own authority that His own kingdom is to grow to the ends of the earth. Nothing and no-one comes between Christ and His kingdom reign. Christ is REALLY present.⁹ The administration of this present and active Spiritual authority, organically resident in the Church as a whole, is required of men by ordination and in the courts of the Church. The Church is

⁸ Princeton and Hodge did not formally enter the debate until over a decade later but there was a continuity in the positions and arguments on both sides.

⁹ There is overlap here with Hodge's debate with Nevin which was later picked up in the South. See Keith Mathison, "Charles Hodge vs. John Williamson Nevin on the Lord's Supper," *Ligonier Ministries*, 31 August 2009, <https://www.ligonier.org/blog/charles-hodge-vs-john-williamson-nevin-on-the-lords-supper/>.

positively constituted by direct orders. Any interference by man in this Spiritual authority is an affront to Christ and His work. Man's interference disempowers.

Hodge accused Thornwell of hair-splitting, a nuisance to a well-oiled and proven mission machine. Thornwell saw a machine that was swiftly on its way to a nuclear meltdown. Not only was it destructive to the real power for missions (he provided data that challenged the party narrative) but it would take the whole Church down with it.

For all this, Thornwell maintained a high regard for Charles Hodge as a theologian of immense ability and loyal service. What Hodge lacked was experience as a pastor. Thornwell said that Hodge's ecclesiology was merely undeveloped because it lacked practical application in the organic life of the local church.

Why Thornwell?

When the Old School Southerners moved back home in 1861, bringing their Presbyterian Church with them, they recognized Thornwell as their principle spokesperson. Having served as moderator in the united church, he now penned the letter "to all the churches of Jesus Christ throughout the earth" to introduce the new Southern church. He lived long enough to help establish the footing of this new church. But so much of what he invested did not last. Theological decay set in during the 1930s. In 1947 the church's committees were converted to boards "with hardly a protest".¹⁰

So it was for some obvious reasons that the PCA, when forming as a Continuing Presbyterian Church, would return to the roots of the Southern church and to Thornwell. But I think that the turn was more than nostalgia or a sense of historical identity. Likely, Thornwell had a near universal following among the founders of the PCA – but for vastly different reasons. For some, Thornwell's Presbyterianism was what they believed the Bible taught. For others, it was merely a comfortable "grass-roots" structure that promised a balance of security and fellowship.

An example of the division between the two can be seen in the rationale for a decentralized system for missionary support.

Those who were Thornwellian by conviction understood that the direct support of missionaries (rather than support from a centralized budget) demonstrated the appropriate sending responsibility of the local church. Every church member is a member of the missionary society and should keenly sense the privilege to support missions, while the corresponding mechanism for this funding is properly a part of the missionary's accountability relationship. In short, sending bodies must *know* who they are sending. Agents running around raising funds only put a firewall between church and missionary. Centralized funding meant centralized power. Deprived of power, the local church would lose interest AND vitality. The Thornwellians believed that a direct support system protected the prerogatives of the Church's involvement in mission. They were happy.

Those who promoted direct missionary support for more pragmatic reasons viewed it as an adoption of parachurch agencies' Best Practices. The churches coming into the PCA – long uneasy with the existing Presbyterian board - had been heavily invested in parachurch agencies for years. They were accustomed to being able to choose which missionaries to support. And they would have observed that

¹⁰ Don K. Clements, *The Historical Roots of the Presbyterian Church in America*, Presbyterian Primers (Narrows, Va.: Metokos Press, 2006), 203.

direct giving is more effective, has more buy-in, and would stimulate faster growth in the missions program. They were also happy.

Establishing MTW

Reaching for the Past

Thornwell's voice is heard from the grave in 1973 when the PCA published its own "Message to all the churches of Jesus Christ throughout the world." This letter declares solidarity with those who, a century earlier, had affirmed that for the Church the Word of God is "the only infallible and all-sufficient rule of faith and practice." It then proceeds to explicitly "affirm with them in their 'Address to All Churches' the application of this principle to the Church and her mission." Particularly, quoting Thornwell's letter, the Church "has no right to utter a single syllable upon any subject except as the Lord puts words in her mouth." Applying this principle, (in the only other quote lifted from 1861) the letter reads:

The only thing that will be at all peculiar to us is the manner in which we shall attempt to discharge our duty. In almost every department of labor, except the pastoral care of congregations, it has been usual for the Church to resort to societies more or less closely connected with itself, and yet logically and really distinct [read "boards"]. It is our purpose to rely upon the regular organs of our government and executive agencies directly and immediately responsible to them. We wish to make the Church, not merely a superintendent, but an agent. We wish to develop the idea that the congregation of believers, as visibly organized is the very society or corporation that is divinely called to do the work of the Lord [read "missions"]. We shall, therefore, endeavor to do what has never been adequately done—bring out the energies of our Presbyterian system of government. From the session to the Assembly, we shall strive to enlist all our courts, as courts, in every department of Christian effort [read "missions"]. We are not ashamed to confess that we are intensely Presbyterian. We embrace all other denominations in the arms of Christian fellowship and love, but our own scheme of government we humbly believe to be according to the pattern shown in the Mount, and, by God's grace, we propose to put its efficiency to the test.

This is an apt summary of the entire system laid out by the PCA in forming MTW. But had it been successful the first time round?

Inevitable Slippage?

In 1861 the first General Assembly of the Southern Presbyterian church had issued the declaration: "obedience to the Great Commission is the great end of our Church's organization and the indispensable condition of her Lord's promised presence." Thornwell was appointed to chair the committee that was to organize this supreme obedience. He argued that Presbytery should function as "the radical and leading court of our system, which should be charged with the responsibility of appointing, sending out and supporting and controlling all missionaries." The assembly was not fully convinced, however, and the system that he subsequently helped to put in place was a compromise. The Board structure of the prior church was replaced with "strictly defined and limited Executive Committees."¹¹ But how "strictly defined and limited" did they turn out to be?

¹¹ Samuel H. Chester, *Behind the Scenes; an Administrative History of the Foreign Work of the Presbyterian Church in the United States*, (Austin, Tex.: Press of Von Boeckmann-Jones Co., 1928), 12.

In subsequent years, situations of necessity required an increasing latitude for decisions to be made by the Executive Committee of Foreign Missions. Decisions needed to be made between the annual Assemblies in order for the Committee to accomplish its perceived mandate. Thus the Executive Committee began “to initiate and conclude many things which, when reported to the Assembly, might be approved or disapproved but could not be undone.”¹²

Morton Smith, the PCA’s first Stated Clerk, comments on this almost inevitable yielding to expediency:

Here is the defining concept of Assembly committees. They are erected to serve and not to direct any Church judicatories. This seems obvious from the very nature of the case. A committee is always the servant of the appointing body. The problem that often arises, however, is the fact that the Assembly is not an on-going body, whereas the Permanent Committees continue to be active between the annual meetings of the General Assembly. The Committees thus become conversant with the particular business assigned to it [sic], and tend to want [to] tell the Assembly what it should do regarding their particular areas of expertise. The problem is accentuated by the fact that the Permanent Committees hire staffs, which are dealing with the business of the Committee on a day to day basis. The staffs then become recognized as the “experts” in the area, and tend to want to recommend and direct the policies of the Assembly.¹³

PCA Redux

With the benefit of a century of accumulated experience and wisdom, our PCA founding fathers tried their own hand at putting into place “strictly defined and limited Executive Committees.” For the supremely important work of missions they recognized two mutually reinforcing but differentiated bonds: Between General Assembly and missions (what I will call the “bond of unity”); and between the lower courts and missions (what I will call the “bond of power”). The details of the plan were articulated in the MTW Manual. The conclusion of this 6-year project speaks well to its objective:

It presents a program of missions which is in the best Reformed tradition and one that all our churches can accept and support. Because of the insistence on the scriptural role of the church and presbytery as the sending bodies and because of the variety of models, the conscience of no individual church member, minister, session or presbytery is violated. This program can maintain the peace and purity of our church and it can unite us in the great work of world missions.¹⁴

The approach taken for the project is deliberately theological, relying on the sufficiency of Scripture, and this is reflected in how the Manual is structured:

¹² Chester, *Behind the Scenes; an Administrative History of the Foreign Work of the Presbyterian Church in the United States*, 13.

¹³ Morton H. Smith, *Commentary on the Book of Church Order: Of the Presbyterian Church in America* (Greenville, SC: Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, 1990). Commenting on BCO 14-1.7. This same line of argument, including an explicit reference to Thornwell’s model, was used as rationale for adding BCO 4-1.15, requiring the business of the Permanent Committees to come to the Assembly only through the committees of commissioners. (see Overture 6 of the 20th GA, <http://pcahistory.org/bco/fog/14/01.html>)

¹⁴ This and subsequent quotes are from the “Manual for Mission to the World Committee” in the form most recently reviewed by GA (Minutes of the 7th GA, pp. 241-251).

The order of the division is important. The first part of the section deals with theology and the second with practice. Theology must always judge practice. It can never be reversed. When practice judges or manipulates theology, it means the death not only of theology but also of missions. Theology cannot live under the domination of practice, but practice can and must live under the domination of theology. We commit ourselves to be a theological mission. We reject pragmatism as a guide for our action. We deplore a superficiality which seeks biblical grounds for positions already taken for other reasons.

A test of this resolve can be found under the heading of “Pentecost”. Will the PCA’s work follow the norms of contemporary Evangelicalism or will she chart her own course according to Scripture? The document connects what is unique about the PCA, as stated earlier in her Letter to all Churches, to the “unique way” Christ rules the Church:

The unique way in which the risen Christ carries on His work through His body, the church, was instituted and demonstrated at Pentecost. It is solely by the authority of the Holy Spirit that the disciples were in a position to be witnesses of Christ to the uttermost parts of the earth. Acts 1:6-8 (cf. Luke 24:47 and John 20:21).

This work of Christ is not only through the Church but also for the Church – not only defining the means but also the mandate.

If the **chief** work of missions is “the planting, propagating and perfecting of congregations,” church planting and strengthening must remain the priority of our mission to the world. . . [here is inserted the quote above from the “address to all the churches”] Therefore, the priority and urgency of planting and nurturing churches overseas and our God-given Reformed doctrine and Presbyterian polity mean that our mission to the world must, through our own efforts and in cooperation with compatible Reformed churches overseas and Reformed missions at home, be engaged primarily in the work of planting and strengthening true Presbyterian churches.

Thus, considering both means and mandate, what I refer to as the “bond of power” describes the foremost and central concern of the PCA’s missionary program.

The Bond of Power

The bond between missionary and Sending Body is the “bond of power”. The commissioning of the missionary by the sending body invests the power of that body in the missionary for a particular assignment.¹⁵ Unlike the local pastor who is installed or local church worker who is assigned, the missionary is commissioned to extend the ministry of the Sending Body.

The book of Acts sets forth the scriptural role of the church — the local church — as the sending authority and as the prayer and financial base for world evangelism. In our Presbyterian system, the proper sending bodies, therefore, are the session of the local church for laymen and the presbytery for ministers.

¹⁵ The 1st GA included a commissioning service for missionaries. However, by the 2nd GA it was made explicit by the MTW Committee that the right to commission did not belong to GA but to the presbyteries and churches. (Minutes, p. 164).

Without being commissioned (including the sustained bond which the act of commissioning entails) the missionary is not in possession of any vocational Spiritual authority to evangelize, disciple, preach, or teach towards establishing/strengthening churches. Commissioning is not an isolated task but rather entails a complex of responsibilities:

The responsibilities of these sending bodies, in consultation with the General Assembly's Committee on Mission to the World, include recruitment, examining, training, support, commissioning, contact, and furlough.¹⁶

The Manual fills in more detail concerning the nature of the bond of missionary to Sending Body:

Recruitment: Referring to BCO 17-1, "The church must take seriously its role to motivate by its challenge and discernment those of its own number to serve God overseas."

Examining:

It is the responsibility of the sending body to examine each missionary candidate thoroughly in the areas of call, life and doctrine. It should seek to evaluate his gifts and calling, his fitness for the missionary task and give him counsel and guidance as he seeks God's will in missions. The session or presbytery will maintain basic oversight for his doctrine and morals and will seek ways of effectively carrying out this responsibility while the missionary is overseas.

Contact:

Following the above procedure, the church at home will feel far more involved in the missionary's work. He came from them; he is supported by them; in a real sense his work is an extension overseas of their own local or presbytery ministry. There should be maintained a vital contact between the missionary and the sending body. The session or presbytery should arrange to receive regular reports from its missionary on the field. It should evaluate his work and seek to offer advice and encouragement. It must take seriously its basic oversight for his doctrine and morals.

Another category, "**The Call to a Particular Work**" was added by the Assembly to the Manual.¹⁷ This addition is of particular interest because by it the Assembly decided (1) that the initiative for the missionary's call properly comes from the Sending Body rather than from GA, and (2) the control of the missionary's call is with the Sending Body and not with GA.

[The decision resolved] a discrepancy between the Mission to the World Manual requiring that a candidate must first be examined and approved for ordination before he receives a call from the Mission to the World Committee and the BCO 21-1 which requires that a man receive a call before he can be examined for ordination.

¹⁶ The Manual here includes a footnote, "For a helpful brief discussion of some of these topics see **Who Really Sends the Missionary?** by Michael C. Griffiths." Having this booklet available on the internet would be useful.

¹⁷ For an anecdotal account, see Kennedy Smartt, *I Am Reminded: An Autobiographical, Anecdotal History of the Presbyterian Church in America* (Chestnut Mountain, Ga: K. Smartt, 1994), 139–40.

Two separate GA committees hammered out language to resolve this discrepancy. They came to opposite conclusions. Both were presented to the Assembly and a clear decision was made in favor of the following process:

1. First, the church/presbytery calls, examines, and approves the candidate for general missionary service.
2. Then the church/presbytery sends a recommendation to GA through its permanent MTW Committee.
3. GA approves the candidate through its Committee.
4. GA, through the Committee staff, identifies a suitable “particular work” and extends a “call”.
5. The church/presbytery ordains and commissions “on the basis of this call”.¹⁸

Thus the organic nature of church power is maintained. The missionary serves principally at the discretion of the Sending Body because therein is the bond for the Spiritual task. The commission can be withdrawn at the will of the commissioning body only. And the nature of the commission is appropriate to the calling of the missionary (whether teaching, preaching, counseling, ruling, evangelizing, etc.). Roles on the field are assigned in accordance with calling and commission.

The Bond of Unity

The bond of missionary with General Assembly (through its committee) is the “bond of unity” within the PCA. GA is “the bond of union, peace and correspondence among all its congregations and courts.” (BCO 14.1) Thus it has power “To institute and superintend the agencies necessary in the general work of evangelization; to appoint ministers of such labors as fall under its jurisdiction” (14-6.f) The Manual begins with a statement of order to clarify how this power functions for missions:

Relationship of the Committee to the Presbyteries and Sessions of the denomination is defined by the duties assigned to the Committee by the General Assembly. Its role is to serve and offer coordinating facilities to these church courts.

Commissioned PCA missionaries are coordinated by GA through its permanent committee. *Coordination* is thus MTW's principle function with regards to church power. Hence the head of MTW is titled “Coordinator”.

This “bond of unity” is expressed in two distinct functions of GA which correspond to two words, *collaboration* and *coordination*. GA *collaborates* with other organizations and church bodies to express the unity of the visible universal Church. GA *coordinates* within the PCA. Stated negatively: GA does not collaborate with PCA courts, and GA does not coordinate the work of non-PCA bodies. Collaboration is case-by-case and the relationship itself is (appropriately) not governed by PCA polity. Coordination is subject to the organic character of the court system.

Contrary to Thornwell, the Manual sees GA Coordination as an important and complex leadership role including strategizing, prioritizing, harmonizing, and motivating.

[The Committee, with the aid of sub-committees,] recommends fields of service and assignment of candidates. (“It is the responsibility of the General Assembly to evaluate needs and resources,

¹⁸ Given the larger context of this policy statement, even at this final stage it is the responsibility of the Sending Body to determine the suitability of the “call”.

and to act on priorities for the most effective fulfillment of the Great Commission.” BCO, 15-1) In our highly complex world, with its political problems, cultural complexity and denominational confusion, it is necessary for the church to give considerable care to the matter of establishing works and ministries overseas. It is necessary that the General Assembly enter into its mission commitments in a careful, prayerful and skillful manner, not carelessly and haphazardly.

Is this an improvement over Thornwell’s model? To the extent that specialized centralized coordination slips into perceived Spiritual authority there is real danger.¹⁹ There is indeed lack of clarity as to how GA must approve new mission fields while, in terms of action, only making recommendations to presbyteries.

But the difference with Thornwell may not be as great as this at first appears. Both Thornwell and the Manual placed much of this coordination work in the hands of missionaries working together on the field. The Coordinator, on behalf of the Committee, is to oversee only an administrative staff.

The MTW Committee (including its staff), as an institution, is not invested with church power. As a committee it neither has commissioned power nor is a commissioning body. Without commissioned missionaries to coordinate it has no power. Herein is the absolute distinction between the “bond of power” and the “bond of unity”.²⁰

Yet the work cannot be other than one organic work. “Distinct” cannot become “separate.”²¹ This “bond of unity” is expressed profoundly in the Manual.

The Mission to the World Committee serves as an “enabling” committee. It was created by the General Assembly to encourage and enable the Presbyterian Church in America at every level to function as a missionary church. The Book of Church Order, Chapter 15, defines the role of the General Assembly and its Committees. “The Assembly is responsible to encourage and promote the fulfillment of this mission (the Great Commission) by the various courts.” “The work of the church as set forth in the Great Commission is one work, being implemented at the General Assembly level through equally essential committees.” “It is the responsibility of the General Assembly to evaluate needs and resources, and to act on priorities for the most effective fulfillment of the Great Commission.” “The Assembly’s committees are to serve and not to direct any church judicatories. They are not to establish policy, but rather execute policy established by the General Assembly.” “The committees serve the church through the duties assigned by the General Assembly.” *The Book of Church Order* sets forth the role of the committees as that of **important** but **limited** servants of the whole church. Within this description, the Mission to the World Committee promotes missions throughout the church, encourages the various courts

¹⁹ The level of this danger can be measured in two ways: (1) by how empowered lower courts feel in advising and caring for their missionaries and (2) by how much the missionaries rely on their sending bodies for advice and care. See Philip DeHart, “Staying Tied to Foreign Missions,” *ByFaith*, 16 January 2019. <https://byfaithonline.com/staying-tied-to-foreign-missions/>

²⁰ There is a BCO provision (15-6) for GA to act as a commissioning body under special circumstances and for a limited period. However, normally GA restricts its own authority according to the commissioning authority of the lower courts.

²¹ The bond with GA cannot be reduced to a mere relationship of employment, for example. It is an organic ecclesiastical relationship.

of the church in their missionary responsibility, co-ordinates the work of missions throughout our denomination.

The role of the Mission to the World Committee is to serve the General Assembly and all the courts of the church, to obey fully the directives of the General Assembly, to be sensitive to its mood and style and to maintain humbly its role as servant.

Foreign missions is not the special preserve of the Mission to the World Committee; rather the Committee acts representatively for the whole church, which is inherently the missionary community. It is not the Committee which sets missionary policy. The church — the whole church in its General Assembly — must take this responsibility.²² The Committee is an “enabling” committee. It seeks to enable the churches and the presbyteries of the PCA to fulfil their obligations to God in missions. It seeks to bring a mission vision to the **whole** denomination. It seeks “to encourage and promote” foreign missions in churches and presbyteries, by sharing resources, ideas, and personnel.

Thus in each of the responsibilities that evidence the “bond of power”, MTW participates as an assistant and servant. This corresponds with its statement of purpose – expansive yet limited:

The Mission to the World Committee exists to enable the Presbyterian Church in America — the whole church — to be a mission church and to enable each church and presbytery to fulfil its mission obligation. We believe that there can be harmony, mutual trust and effective, creative co-operation between the Mission to the World Committee and the churches and presbyteries of our denomination.

Specific measures were put in place to preserve this servant role and to protect the body from a role reversal. For example, the Committee recommended to the 5th General Assembly a process that would distinguish between policy and policy. Some policies are more sacred than others. Certainly there should be a distinction between theological policy statements and HR policy statements. So the Policy Manual was separated from the Handbooks. Interestingly, this was the Committee’s initiative in recommending:

That the Assembly separate sections III and IV (Handbooks for Candidates and Missionaries) from the policy section of the Mission Manual so far as revision procedure is concerned, the policy manual to be revised only by General Assembly procedures while changes in the handbooks (which unavoidably need continual changes to meet changing situations with regard to such things as insurance, annuity, travel, etc.) be reported annually to the MTW Committee of Commissioners at the General Assembly for their approval.

The intent, no doubt, was that the Committee wanted to guard itself against autonomy. Changes to the Manual should be infrequent enough that the Assembly would surely sit up and take notice! More frequent changes to the Handbooks would come to the Assembly as more routine recommendations from the Committee of Commissioners. Greater care would be taken that changes to the Handbook would not violate the Manual.

²² Here the Manual includes a footnote, “See Acts 15 where the church through its representatives dealt with a theological issue which arose in the contest of missions.”

Satisfaction with such “strictly defined and limited Executive Committees” was to be expressed two years later by the 7th GA.

Conclusion

Listen to Thornwell once again:

It is in vain to urge that our fathers never contemplated the extended scale of benevolent operations which God in his providence has enabled us to carry forward. They were men deeply imbued with the Spirit of all grace. They understood well, for they had faithfully studied the appropriate functions of the Church; they looked narrowly and closely into the nature, arrangements, and powers of the system of ecclesiastical action which Christ and his apostles had established; they felt it to be adequate to all the exigencies of any age and any part of the world; and in the fear of God they endeavored to construct all things according to the pattern shown them in the mount. We, however, in the fulness of our wisdom and the enlargement of our views, have constructed a different system; and the question is now forced upon all sound and conscientious Presbyterians, whether they will abide by their ancient and venerable and scriptural standards, or swear allegiance to the new order of things which has imperceptibly grown up and silently stolen upon us.²³

As humble servants let us recognize our perpetual vulnerability to “a new order of things”. We turn away constantly from “the fulness of our wisdom and the enlargement of our views” to cling afresh to our “ancient and venerable and scriptural standards.” Therein is restored power.

²³ James Henley Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell* (Edinburgh ; Carlisle, Pa: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 4:155–56, <https://archive.org/details/collectedwriting04thor/page/n6>.