

Samuel Miller's Pastoral Theology

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by Andrew 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." 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 inevitably 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 hasn't yet read anything by Miller might decide to pick up one of his volumes, and perhaps even come to embrace Miller's Old School Presbyterianism as a result.

It will be impossible in the space of this essay to give a comprehensive analysis of Miller's theology and work. 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. I want in particular 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.

¹ "The Intellectual Life of Samuel Miller" by John De Witt, pp. 177-178, (Princeton Theological Review, January 1906).

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 revolution. In fact, John Miller's oldest son, who was a physician, enlisted in the Continental Army. After attending the sick and wounded during the critical battles of Trenton and Princeton, he died of exhaustion and pneumonia in early 1777, 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. It was called to order by John Witherspoon, sixth president of Princeton University, and signer of the Declaration of Independence. It was 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 may be happy to learn that Miller was home-schooled 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. He went on to graduate first in his class the next year, and to deliver the Latin Salutatory 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 in 1791, when his mother and then his father both died.

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. They included oral examinations in Latin and Greek, experiential religion, general college studies, and theology. He also delivered two sermons, an exegetical paper on Luke, and an exegetical paper delivered in

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

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, whose family Miller lived with in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. John De Witt stated his belief that it was this association that made it possible for Miller to quote, “move with ease into learned society.”³ 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. Later in life, when struck with typhoid, Miller wrote in his diary, “Oh for grace to improve this solemn dispensation of his providence.”⁴

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 united 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 United churches (or collegiate churches) in New York is in order at this point. Some may think that Redeemer PCA was the first “multi-site” Presbyterian church in New York City; but actually it was the Collegiate or United 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 among the citizens. As the original church on Wall Street grew in size, instead of planting independent congregations, they built a new building, and called another pastor to assist Dr. Rodgers. Soon after Miller was called to be a 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 eventually, 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 multi-site 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 very 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 whom he was laboring alongside. Miller had to quote William Sprague who had “an uncommonly polished style, and there was an air of literary

³ *Intellectual Life of Samuel Miller*, p. 173.

⁴ *Life of Samuel Miller*, p.359.

refinement pervading all his performances.”⁵ 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.”⁶ Miller said of this calling, that he “served with [John Rodgers] as a son in the Gospel, for more than seventeen years”⁷

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. 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, while Sarah was not disinterested in religion (far from it), her 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.”⁸ They eventually had 10 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 he was persuaded to make it into the basis of a book called, *A Brief Retrospect of the 18th Century*, which was published in 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 in 1804 from his *alma mater*, the University of Pennsylvania, and one 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 old 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 in New York, such as that of the Presbyterians. And they had done much to make their ministry as difficult as possible. During and immediately after

⁵ *Annals of the American Presbyterian Pulpit*, by William Bell Sprague, p.600 (New York, 1860).

⁶ *Memoirs of the Rev. John Rodgers, D. D.: Late Pastor of the Wall-street and Brick Churches in the City of New-York* by Samuel Miller, p.88 (New York, 1813).

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 3.

⁸ *The life of Samuel Miller, D. D., LL. D.: Second Professor in the Theological Seminary of the Presbyterian church, at Princeton, New Jersey, Volume 2*, p.481

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 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 Episcopally ordained Bishops, there was no church. Miller responded admirably with a number of works defending Presbyterianism, eventually including the nucleus of his book in which I was first introduced to him, published at the request of the Presbyterian Board of Publication in 1840: *“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, *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. 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. ⁹

While he was in New York, 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 the 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.” ¹⁰

One reason that there were so few ministers, was that so many of the men going to Princeton University, were now training for other fields; and the level of piety at that institution ebbed for several years under the Presidency of Samuel Stanhope Smith. He was a man who had more interest in science and philosophy than theology. He had removed Jonathan Edwards from the reading list, and replaced him with men of decidedly Arminian and rationalistic sympathies, like Thomas Reid, whose “Essays” was apparently his favorite book. 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 began to

⁹ Miller’s biography, on the other hand, is tediously detailed and often dry as dust.

¹⁰ Minutes – United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A, United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. General Assembly, United Presbyterian Church of North America. General Assembly, p.101 (1803).

disappear under Green, and two years later Princeton was blessed with a wonderful revival.

Miller not only wanted a separate seminary to meet the critical need for new ministers, but it was also because by 1800 it had become clear that far too often, colleges like Harvard — that had been created to provide an educated *ministry* — ended up becoming liberal in their theology, and thus a bane rather than a boon to the church. As Miller put it to Green,

“If it is desired to have the divinity school uncontaminated by the college, to have its government unfettered, and its orthodoxy and purity perpetual, it appears to me that a separate establishment will be on many accounts desirable.”¹¹

Miller’s support for this venture, both at the General Assembly level, and also helping to raise the funds that made it possible, was of critical importance. And so, on August 12, 1812, when Dr. Archibald Alexander was inaugurated as the first professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, Miller was the natural choice to preach the inaugural sermon. In it 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. Here I want to spend some time going over Miller’s comments, because in this sermon he identified the four qualities that make for an able and faithful ministry, and therefore the four things that Princeton Theological Seminary would endeavor to cultivate in its students. They were:

- 1) Piety
- 2) Natural Talents
- 3) Competent Knowledge
- 4) Diligence

1) 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 with which he himself has never been comforted by God? He cannot possibly perform, as he should, *any* of these duties; and yet they are the most precious and interesting parts of the ministerial work. However gigantic his intellectual powers; however deep, and various, and accurate his learning, he is not able to teach others in relation to any of these points, seeing he is not taught himself. If he makes the attempt, it will be the blind leading the blind; and unerring wisdom has told us the consequence of this.”¹²

¹¹ *Life of Samuel Miller*, vol. 1, p. 242.

¹² *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*, p.13-14 (New York, 1812).

Therefore, Miller felt it was necessary that the seminary train up not just *learned* but *pious* ministers. And 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!”¹³

2) 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*, by which 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 childishness, which are calculated to bring the ministry and the Bible into contempt.”¹⁴ Sadly, Miller’s statement above sounds like a prophetic description of what the public has come to expect from the preaching of modern televangelists.

3) Now 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 he stated,

“Let this inspiration, confirmed as it then was by miracle, now be produced, and we will acknowledge it as more than an adequate substitute for the ordinary method of acquiring knowledge by books and study.”¹⁵

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’ (Phi 1:17).

¹³ Ibid, p.18.

¹⁴ Ibid, p.21.

¹⁵ Ibid, p.22.

“And, therefore, he 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. Psa 106:23) when men, ever so covertly or artfully, depart from “the faith once delivered to the saints” (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’ (2Tim. 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.”¹⁶

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.

4) Finally, Miller noted that the able minister had to be *active, diligent, and persevering* in the discharge of his multiplied and arduous duties. He warned,

“However fervent his piety; however vigorous his native talents; and however ample his acquired knowledge; yet, if he is 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.”¹⁷

A minister must therefore be a man 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, is that the Church may be built up; that souls may be saved; and that Christ in all things may be glorified (1Pet 4:11).”¹⁸

I would beg 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, 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.¹⁹ My experiences on the Candidates Committee of two different presbyteries also do not give me the impression that piety is increasing among 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

¹⁶ Ibid, p.23-25.

¹⁷ Ibid, p.27.

¹⁸ Ibid, p.28.

¹⁹ “What Do You Think About the State of Today’s Church?”, White Horse Inn video, 2008, available online at: <http://youtu.be/o6y6ZXl57DY>

this decline that denominational leaders are all aware of, 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 this warning of Miller:

“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.”²⁰

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.”²¹

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 that year. He served faithfully in that office for 36 years, until May of 1849, when ill health made it impossible for him to continue. He died the following January; and thus he remained “in harness” almost until the very end of his life. Because other men will be focusing on the work of the seminary, I want to briefly focus on some of the pastoral emphases of Miller’s teaching which so shaped the graduates of that institution for almost half a century.

Preaching:

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 own 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 among the public, against ministers who read their sermons. Later, after he went to Princeton, he was able to bring his manuscripts into the pulpit with him.²² There was an incidental advantage 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, were 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.”²³

²⁰ “The Sermon Delivered at the Inauguration of the Rev. Archibald Alexander”, p.45.

²¹ Ibid, p.47.

²² “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*, by William Bell Sprague, p. 603)

²³ Ibid, p. 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”²⁴ He had another wonderful quality as an instructor; namely, that as one student put it, “his criticisms were given with all the kind gentleness of a father”²⁵ 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 to his students on preaching may be found in his *Letters on Clerical Manners and Habits*. Admittedly, some of the advice is dated, but 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 it will 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 you must soon give an account of the sermon which you are about to deliver, before His judgment seat.”²⁶

While Miller refused calls to become the pastor of congregations in the Princeton area, Miller 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.”²⁷ 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 equivalent to 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!*

Controversy:

Miller was frequently called upon to engage in polemical and controversial disputations. And at various points, he 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*

²⁴ *Life of Samuel Miller*, vol. 2, p. 54.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Letters on Clerical Manners and Habits: Addressed to a Student in the Theological Seminary, at Princeton, N.J.*, p.308-309 (New York, 1827).

²⁷ *Annals of the American Presbyterian Pulpit*, p.608.

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 he 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.”²⁸

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 controvertist. 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.”²⁹

Ruling Elder –

It would be very wrong to write of the work of Samuel Miller and not comment on what is perhaps his most 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. 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. However, it did precipitate a lengthy controversy with the Southern Presbyterians, who argued that elder was actual 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 the 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:

²⁸ “The Primitive and Apostolical Order of the Church of Christ Vindicated”, p.7 (Philadelphia, 1840).

²⁹ Annals of the American Presbyterian Pulpit, p.607.

“The idea 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.”³⁰

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 will 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 everywhere, 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 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 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 an impossibility; and impossibilities that the great and merciful Head of the Church requires of no man.”³¹

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 Miller stressed 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 rightly perform 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

³⁰ *An Essay on the Warrant, Nature, and Duties of the Office of the Ruling Elder*, by Samuel Miller, p.54 (New York, 1832).

³¹ *Ibid*, 176.

admonitions; and in a word, by every means in their power, to promote the comfort and extend the usefulness of his labours.”³²

Incidentally, if we wonder why piety is at such a low ebb, the answer might just be that we have a tendency to choose Ruling Elders who are able *administrators* or who are *popular*, but are not pious men. Miller warned,

“We have no reason to expect, in general, that the piety of most 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” (1Cor. 3:1), we will rarely find many under their care of more vitality or of superior stature.”³³

In closing – I was privileged to recently hear Dr. 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 the 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 is, 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 many 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!”³⁴

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³² Ibid, p.204.

³³ Ibid, p.255.

³⁴ “The Sermon Delivered at the Inauguration of the Rev. Archibald Alexander”, p.49.

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I was converted out of paganism and the occult in 1993. And while I was initially Charismatic/Arminian in my theology, I became Reformed and Presbyterian through bible study and the influence of ministries like RC Sproul's. After teaching in local bible studies, and taking seminary courses part time, I began to feel called to the ministry in 1997. I was Ordained as an RE at Christ Covenant PCA in Hatboro, PA in 2000 and as a TE by Central Carolina Presbytery in 2001, when I was called to be the Organizing Pastor/Church Planter for Providence.

[Samuel Miller's Pastoral Theology | Building Old School Churches \(wordpress.com\)](http://www.wordpress.com)