

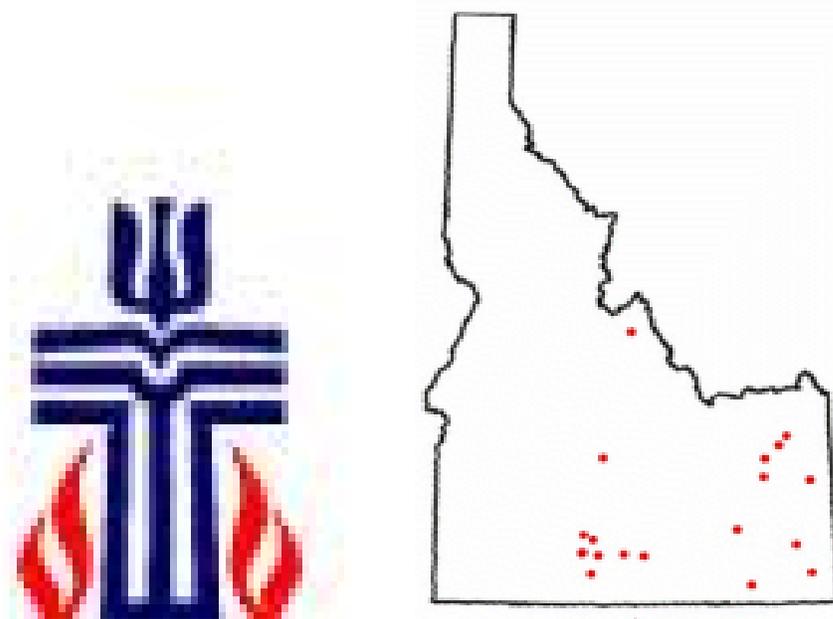
THE KENDALL CONSTELLATION

A Newsletter of Kendall Presbytery

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“A great sign appeared in Heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She gave birth to a Son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. And her child was caught up to God and to His throne.” (Revelation 12:1, 5)



Please forward this to all your friends in Kendall Presbytery.

ANSWERS TO OBJECTIONS

Some of the often-expressed reasons given for leaving the PC(USA) are stated in **bold print** below and are responded to by Rev. Ron Lavoie, Executive Presbyter and Stated Clerk of Kendall Presbytery.

“For years we have been devoting time, talent, and resources to internal struggles” That is true. It has ever been an important part of the Church’s witness, since the days of the Apostles to bear internal witness to the Church as it also bears external witness to the world about us. We invite the world to accept what God has done for us in Jesus Christ and we also seek to obey the Apostle Paul’s instruction: “Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction.” II Timothy 4:2. It is frustrating at times, so we are admonished to exercise great patience and provide careful instruction. At what point in the history of the Church has this responsibility been less needed or difficult? At what point did this Apostolic instruction apply more than it does to us today?

“The PC(USA) refuses to identify essential tenets” Or, more precisely, when *we’ve* met in General Assembly and considered this point, *we* decided that this responsibility rightly belongs to each Session and each Presbytery which bears the responsibility to examine candidates for ordination, whether Teaching Elders, Ruling Elders, or Deacons. I emphasize that *we’ve* done this because the General Assembly is not a distant, detached “other” to be regarded with suspicion and charged with every cowardly and malevolent motive. The General Assembly is *we ourselves* gathered together in prayer, discussion, wrangling, in the grace of

God and all the imperfection of our human condition. We gather to seek and sort out our way as best we can in spite of our shortcomings and we ultimately yield ourselves to God's corrective and guiding hand, trusting that God will correct our mistakes (which we will undoubtedly make whenever we gather) and give us discernment to recognize the bitter fruit of wrong decisions made in the past. We are "ever Reformed, ever being reformed" under the grace of God's Almighty hand.

We fully recognize that in giving such responsibility to individual Sessions and Presbyteries, "*in the exercise of this right they may, notwithstanding, err, in making the terms of communion either too lax or too narrow; yet, even in this case, they do not infringe upon the liberty or the rights of others, but only make an improper use of their own.*" (Book of Order F-3.0102). In other words, understanding that people will inevitably make mistakes, we protect the Church from wholesale corruption by assigning this responsibility to individual Sessions and Presbyteries who, when they err (and they surely will, from time to time) affect only a smaller circle rather than devastate the entire Church as would happen if we assigned this responsibility to the General Assembly and they, in turn, erred (and they surely would, from time to time). This same recognition of human frailty and the reluctance to assign such power to the highest levels of government is reflected in the federal system (states' rights) of the U.S. Government and the checks and balances instituted among the Executive, Judicial, and Legislative branches of the government. These concepts were derived from the Calvinist Reformation.

"The PC(USA) no longer clearly communicates why and how Jesus matters to a world that needs to know" On the contrary, all across this country, from the pulpits on Sunday mornings, to

pastor's bible studies during Sunday mornings or 'mid week events, from congregational websites to Church newsletters, the Teaching Elders and Commissioned Ruling Elders regularly preach the gospel of Jesus Christ with power and eloquence. Those who expect this to be the job of the General Assembly and not the job of the thousands of congregations and their pastors labor under a misconception of both roles and it is no wonder that they are frustrated.

“A recent survey ... found that less than half of PC(USA) members, elders, and pastors agree that Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation” Surveys are a tricky business and are not for amateurs. Much depends on how the question is worded and how it is interpreted by the one answering the question. In regard to this particular question, one likely “interpretation” of the question being responded to was *“Can anyone be saved who has not personally confessed faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior?”* If that was what they thought the question was actually asking, they might have questioned back in reply, “What about Moses, Isaiah, infants who die in infancy, or the severely mentally challenged?” ... Presbyterians are a thoughtful, sensitive people and they would not have answered an unqualified “yes” to such a question unless they were clear on exactly what was being asked.

“The Session of *our* Church believes in the absolute Lordship of Jesus Christ, in the unquestionable means of salvation for the world through Him, and in the infallible authority of God's Word in all matters of faith. We consider these to be essential tenets of our faith.”

Amen! We knew you could do it! When *we* decided at General Assembly to assign this responsibility of defining the essential

tenets of the faith to each individual Session and Presbytery, we did so because we had confidence that our Sessions and Presbyteries had the faith and the devotion to search the Scriptures and the Confessions and to do exactly what you have done. And, no doubt, you are the stronger for it. Other Sessions have done and are doing the same, using similar words in many cases and living out their faith. You shouldn't want to have this spoon-fed to you by the General Assembly. In the same way, and for the same reason, local school boards do not want their curriculums dictated to them in every detail by the Federal Government.

“The PC(USA) fails to affirm the authority of Scripture.” I find this objection *stunning*. What other denomination has so fully and so boldly confessed what it believes as we have done? Where would you look for stronger statements about the role and authority of Scripture than in our Confessions? One such example from the Book of Confessions is as follows: *“CANONICAL SCRIPTURE: We believe and confess the canonical Scriptures of the holy prophets and apostles of both Testaments to be the true Word of God, and to have sufficient authority of themselves, not of men. For God himself spoke to the fathers, prophets, apostles, and still speaks to us through the Holy Scriptures. And in this Holy Scripture, the universal Church of Christ has the most complete exposition of all that pertains to a saving faith, and also to the framing of a life acceptable to God; and in this respect it is expressly commanded by God that nothing be either added to or taken from the same. SCRIPTURE TEACHES FULLY ALL GODLINESS: We judge, therefore, that from these Scriptures are to be derived true wisdom and godliness, the reformation and government of churches; as also instruction in all duties of piety; and, to be short, the confirmation of doctrines, and the rejection of*

all errors, moreover, all exhortations according to that word of the apostle, “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof,” etc. (II Tim. 3:16–17). Again, “I am writing these instructions to you,” says the apostle to Timothy, “so that you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God,” etc. (I Tim. 3:14–15). SCRIPTURE IS THE WORD OF GOD: Again, the selfsame apostle to the Thessalonians: “When,” says he, “you received the Word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it, not as the word of men but as what it really is, the Word of God,” etc. (I Thess. 2:13.) For the Lord himself has said in the Gospel, “It is not you who speak, but the Spirit of my Father speaking through you”; therefore “he who hears you hears me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me” (see Matt. 10:20; Luke 10:16; John 13:20).” (The Second Helvetic Confession 5.001-5.003)

“The 2010 General Assembly voted to remove the “fidelity and chastity” clause from our Book of Order, so our denomination no longer requires that persons wishing to be ordained as pastors, elders and deacons be faithful in their marriages or chaste in their singleness.” Not even close! What *we* decided, at General Assembly, was to trust the Sessions and Presbyteries, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and subject to the chastening hand of Almighty God, to examine each candidate in the light of Scripture and the Confessions. The new language is more in keeping with our historic polity and practice. The much-disputed G-6.0106b was an aberration and the beginnings of a forfeiture of the historic rights of Sessions and Presbyteries to the General Assembly. This would eventually have led to a longer list of specific qualifications and prohibitions as it has done in other Reformed bodies which have taken that route. I know of several

such ministers who have been drummed out of the ministry for failing to acknowledge that the world was created in six literal 24-hour days or that the earth was less than 10,000 years old. I know of another who lost his credentials because he refused to subscribe to the doctrine of double predestination.

The much-disputed paragraph was replaced with the following from G-2.0104 *“Gifts and Qualifications:”*

a. To those called to exercise special functions in the church—deacons, ruling elders, and teaching elders—God gives suitable gifts for their various duties. In addition to possessing the necessary gifts and abilities, those who undertake particular ministries should be persons of strong faith, dedicated discipleship, and love of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Their manner of life should be a demonstration of the Christian gospel in the church and in the world. They must have the approval of God’s people and the concurring judgment of a council of the church.

b. Standards for ordained service reflect the church’s desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life (F-1.02). The council responsible for ordination and/or installation (G-2.0402; G-2.0607; G-3.0306) shall examine each candidate’s calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability for the responsibilities of ordered ministry. The examination shall include, but not be limited to, a determination of the candidate’s ability and commitment to fulfill all requirements as expressed in the constitutional questions for ordination and installation (W-4.4003). Councils shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates.

Few congregations would have any difficulty in applying this standard as they examine candidates for ordination. And, since

2010, very few have. In 2010, we pulled back from a decades-long argument that had intoxicated the national press (giving us nothing but *bad* press) and distracted us from the real work of examining candidates, which had become perfunctory and shallow over the years. We called each Session and Presbytery back to the serious task of examining candidates, not only in terms of their personal Christian lives, but in their theology, their temperament, and their suitability to serve in specific times and places. After decades of “mucking in the mire,” we found the sense to take the high road and to trust our Presbyteries and Sessions and the results since speak for themselves. If some should on occasion fail in upholding the clear standards of Scripture and the guidance of our Confessions, (and some will, just as surely as humans are imperfect) we entrust them to the corrective hand of God and we accept our calling to speak words of correction and rebuke as is, and ever has been, our duty as disciples of Christ, who also spoke words of correction and rebuke as he taught God’s Word among us while on Earth (see Matt.23:1-36).

A word about General Assembly and the democratic process:

First if all, let’s remember that General Assembly is not a “them” to be contrasted with “us.” General Assembly is not even a certain group of people, per se. General Assembly is a bi-annual meeting of “us” designed primarily to order and direct worldwide mission and also to decide on policies for the larger Church. The actual persons attending and voting at General Assembly changes every time it meets. This accounts for a somewhat un-predictable nature of the meetings, the decisions of which are sometimes reversed by a subsequent General Assembly.

Every year at General Assembly, I’ve noticed more than a few commissioners opening up their commissioner packets for the first

time as they find their places at the tables assigned to them. That they come unprepared to GA has something to do with human frailty exemplified in their own procrastination or perhaps that of their Presbyteries which elect them at a very late date, preventing them from proper preparation. Others attend as late-appointed substitutes for those who have fallen ill or are otherwise prevented from attending. The process is imperfect, to say the least, and that imperfection sometimes shows through in some of the decisions rendered at GA - but these are not examples of a degenerate or unfaithful Church, but of the inevitable imperfections of a democratic process undertaken on a large scale by imperfect, volunteer participants.

Furthermore, the General Assembly is dominated by a “metropolitan” political sensibility, since each Presbytery sends a proportional representation of its membership as commissioners to G.A. In light of the fact that our most populous Presbyteries often come from the metropolitan areas of the nation, their viewpoints (including their views on controversial social issues) often reflect a metropolitan political sensibility. Since it only takes a simple majority to “pass” something at G.A., it has been observed that new ideas often get approved at G.A. when they have little chance of being finally adopted by a majority of our Presbyteries as our constitution requires. Remember, in the final analysis, each Presbytery gets only *one* (yea or nay) vote, regardless of its population size.

What this all means is that we have structured ourselves, as a denomination, to be very open to new ideas and very cautious about adopting these new ideas until they have attained a near-consensus, since we allot every Presbytery a single yea or nay vote, regardless of its size. Managing the anxiety created by this interval between steps one and two is a difficult task requiring

constant polity education in our Churches and maturity on the part of all Presbyterians.

Democracy is not easy, and it is not free. It comes at a significant cost. It means that we will never be able to avoid discussing in the Church the controversial issues of our times, nor is it realistic to expect that we will ever be in complete agreement on things which provoke strong disagreement in our society in general. It means that we will, at least to some degree, fall prey to the failures and shortcomings of our own day and age. But by being democratic, we hope and believe that the Church will never succumb to wholesale corruption (as it nearly did prior to the Reformation) and that our children will be able, by God's grace, to correct the mistakes we make today even as they face their own challenges, yet to be imagined.

In hopes of rising above the peculiar shortcomings of our day and age (and they feel *very* peculiar at times), we commend the historic *Confessions* of the Church for the study of our members as they seek to know God's will and interpret the Word of God. Perhaps among the largely-unnoticed shortcomings of our times are all-too-common words of contempt for the Church, echoing the words of the world, rather than the words of Christ which are filled with overflowing praise: "*You are altogether beautiful, my darling; there is no flaw in you.*" (Song of Solomon 4:7). May we strive to be as gracious in our appraisal of the Church, and may God save us from contradicting His love and mercy.

In Christ's Love and Grace,

Ron Lavoie

Executive Presbyter/Stated Clerk
Kendall Presbytery