

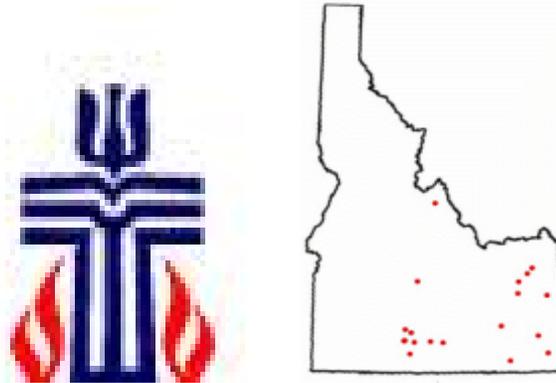
THE KENDALL CONSTELLATION

A Newsletter of Kendall Presbytery

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“Then war broke out in Heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in Heaven. The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him ...

When the dragon saw that he had been hurled to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring—those who keep God’s commands and hold fast to their testimony about Jesus.”

(Revelation 12:7-9, 13, 17)



Please forward this to all your friends in Kendall Presbytery.

What Are the “Essential Tenets” of the Reformed Faith?

A simmering controversy in the Presbyterian Church (USA) over the last decade has been taking place over identification of the *essential tenets*, prompted by the third ordination question which reads as follows:

“Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will you be instructed and led by those confessions as you lead the people of God?” Book of Order W-4.4003

Naturally, this has led many to ask, “Where can I get my hands on this list of essential tenets?” and the murky response from all levels of the Church has led many to jump to the conclusion that the Presbyterian Church (USA) is itself unclear about what it believes or unwilling to express itself clearly when it comes to core theological beliefs. Many have asked, rhetorically and out of irritation, “What about something about Jesus Christ being the Son of God? ... surely, we can include that!” But the response has been somewhat murky, at least for those who will not sit still long enough to listen to a nuanced answer, or whose suspicion of the Church is so near the surface that they are ever-willing to indict, rarely willing to listen - many are impatient and implacable.

Often little can be done to change this nearly-hostile attitude toward the Church, and it makes me wonder how we ever got to the point where people think that such negative feelings toward the Church can be pleasing to God. What has the Church done that deserves such a reception? Why would Christians be so ready to join the chorus of the world in hateful words against the Church? and where is the fear of God in those who name the name of Christ but fail to recognize that He will one Day come in judgment to redeem and vindicate His Bride against all foul, unfounded accusations? Where is the fear of God in harboring such attitudes of "guilty until proven innocent" against the Church or any part of her?

Of all the failures of our present age, ours is, in my opinion, likely to be reckoned one day, like those of the past, to be something that we do not now readily recognize. Consider that one day our age will prove to have been soiled not so much by the controversy over sexuality, but over a widespread contempt for the Bride of Christ.

For those who are still listening, here is the explanation of the *Essential Tenets*:

In the Presbyterian Church, "essential tenets" is a term of art, deriving from the English syntax of the 18th century, and growing out of our unique experience in examining ministers for ordination. In other words, the words mean something special to us, owing to their ancient origination and coming out of our history - they do not mean what they sound like to modern ears, separated from this historical context.

Long ago, the third ordination question used to read something like this: "*Do you sincerely receive and adopt the Reformed faith as expressed in the confession of our church?*" Notice that there is no reference to essential tenets, and there is reference to only one confession of faith, namely, the Westminster Confession of Faith from the 'mid 17th century, together with the Longer and Shorter Catechisms written to assist adults and children, respectively, learn the theological content of the Confession (how times have changed!).

In response to this question, more and more ministerial candidates began answering something like, "essentially, yes." By the middle of the 18th century, differences between Calvin's Institutes and the Westminster Standards began to be noticed and debated. This was especially true in regard to Sabbath-keeping which was fraught with strict codes of behavior in the Westminster Standards and seemed to derive not from Calvin's theology but from the Puritan influences in England which were at a high pitch at the time of the writing of the Westminster Confession.

Increasingly, candidates would qualify their support of the Westminster Confession in some way. A testament to this "tempest in a teacup" is found in the footnotes of today's edition of Calvin's Institutes where Calvin expounds on the Sabbath commandment and gives voice to a startlingly different interpretation - a New Testament interpretation completely lost on the Puritans, famous for their "stern, impassioned, stress" and the subsequent witch trials of Salem, Massachusetts.

In response to the trend of trained seminarians qualifying their otherwise solid support of the Westminster Confession, examining presbyteries would ask a follow-up question, such as: "What, then, are your scruples?" Scruples were, in the language of the day, minor objections to the Confession as plainly written. Examiners would then determine if the scruples constituted an "incidental" or "essential" departure from the Reformed Faith. In regard to very-strict Sabbath keeping, some judicatories were more lenient than others, and the principle of allowing the local examining body "to determine, in the midst of the concrete

encounter with the candidate, what was essential and what was incidental” began to work its way out.

It is important to recognize that at no time was the deity of Christ, salvation only through His atoning grace, Scripture as the Word of God, and such things as this, ever (then or since) ever held in doubt by any presbytery. It was simply an adjustment to the examination of candidates that allowed for an honest expression of their conscience and actually served, over time, to help us identify an unexamined absorption of Puritan mannerisms into the Reformed Tradition. For this and other reasons, the Westminster standards today are viewed by many as Puritan confessions, not Reformed confessions, per se.

Having successfully navigated the examination process, the candidates were, then as now, subsequently presented for ordination in a public service of worship. At such occasions, the candidates were again asked to respond to the ordination questions for the edifying benefit of the gathered congregation. In this context, however, it was considered unseemly to receive a qualified response such as “essentially, yes,” so the question was revised to provide the already-approved candidate with a platform to answer with an unequivocal “I do.” The question now was adjusted to read like this, “*Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confession of our church?,*” to which the candidate would be expected to reply with an unqualified affirmation.

For a time, the question was asked one way for the examination and the adjusted version was asked at the time of public ordination. Any scruples the candidate might have were evaluated on a case by case basis during the examination process and, inevitably, the standards being upheld in regard to the permissibility of any given scruple would vary from time to time or from one region to another. This was a cause for some concern and many sought standardization, but that was not easily achievable through a democratic process. Differences remained - in regard to the Sabbath and later in regard to the doctrine of double-predestination. In their wisdom, our forefathers decided to leave the matter in the hands of the Holy Spirit and to restrict the power of the Church. Their statements to this effect, still dripping with 18th century English syntax, are found in today’s Book of Order: (*emphasis supplied*)

“F-3.0102 Corporate Judgment

... every Christian Church, or union or association of particular churches, is entitled to declare the terms of admission into its communion, and the qualifications of its ministers and members, as well as the whole system of its

internal government which Christ hath appointed; *that 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.*”

“F-3.0107 Church Power

... all Church power, whether exercised by the body in general or in the way of representation by delegated authority, is only ministerial and declarative; that is to say, that the Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith and manners; that no Church judicatory ought to pretend to make laws to bind the conscience in virtue of their own authority; and that all their decisions should be founded upon the revealed will of God. *Now though it will easily be admitted that all synods and councils may err, through the frailty inseparable from humanity, yet there is much greater danger from the usurped claim of making laws than from the right of judging upon laws already made, and common to all who profess the gospel, although this right, as necessity requires in the present state, be lodged with fallible men.*”

In my opinion, all widely-repeated accusations against the Presbyterian Church (USA) - accusations of infidelity to the Scriptures, accusations of lack of conviction necessary to articulate its beliefs, accusations of moral laxity in regard to examination of its officers for ordination, accusations of every type by those ready, if not eager, to hear and repeat some tiding of ill-will against the Church - all such accusations are as easily dismissed as this simmering controversy over essential tenets - for those who have ears to hear.

I appeal to my brothers and sisters throughout the Presbyterian Church (USA), to rekindle their love for the Church and speak words of tender compassion for her as she faces the ire and contempt of Satan in this world. Come to her aid. Come to her defense. Love her. Pray for her.. Cherish her as does Christ Himself ... “lest perhaps you find yourselves fighting against God.” (Acts 5:39)

In His Love,

Ron Lavoie,

Stated Clerk/Executive
Kendall Presbytery