

Response to the Bethany Presbyterian Church Session Position Paper

1. **CONTENTION:** That the PCUSA has departed from the fundamental belief that Scripture is the inerrant, inspired, authoritative Word of God.

RESPONSE:

Within the Book of Confessions, one finds a general harmony, a broad consensus, and a functional unity to which one can appeal. Even though the creeds and confessions do not display one voice in all matters, one can find coherence in the following general areas of agreement in all the confessions from the sixteenth century to the Confession of 1967. These areas can help direct us into the guidelines that we seek as the third part of the referral.

1. *The Authority of the Scripture is Clearly Affirmed*

The nature of the authority is practical. It attaches to the written word, the canon of sixty-six sacred books, sufficient guidance for the purposes of salvation and living the life of faith. No new revelations are needed. The locus of the divine message – the gospel message – is not in the bare words, but in the meaning. Only by the inward working of the Holy Spirit can a person be assured that these canonical Scriptures are the authentic word of God.

2. *Six Basic Rules for the Interpretation of Scripture Found in the Confessions*

First, Jesus Christ, as our Redeemer, is the central focus of Scripture.

Second, our appeal should be to the plain text of Scripture, to the grammatical and historical context, rather than to allegory or subjective fantasy.

Third, the Holy Spirit aids us in interpreting and applying God's message.

Fourth, doctrinal consensus of the early church as summarized in the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Definition of Chalcedon is the rule of faith that guides us.

Fifth, all interpretations must accord with the rule of love, the two-fold commandment to love God and to love our neighbor.

Sixth, interpretation of the Bible requires human scholarship in order to establish the best text, to understand the original languages, and to interpret the influence of the historical and cultural context in which the divine message has come.

3. *Latitude is Allowed Within Clear Limits*

The confessions establish limits within which they may be invoked as guide and outside of which one may no longer be operating within the Reformed tradition. For example, we may not claim as confessional the position that the Bible is an inerrant account of technical information on matters of science. Nor, on the other hand, may we claim confessional support if we treat Scripture only as an account of ancient religious history. One is not confessional in arguing that God is revealed by the Spirit in contradiction of Scripture. One cannot find confessional support for the claim that only human reason, without reference to Scripture, is a reliable spiritual guide. One would be as contraconfessional in asserting either that the Bible has no normative relevance for contemporary conduct or that the Bible provides absolute and detailed laws for every act in human affairs.

4. *There Is a Center to the Scripture*

The confessions taken as a whole show the center of Scripture to be the normative message of how we may be reconciled to God and to one another. The confessions call the people of God to be dynamic confessing Christians rather than wooden traditionalists. The church recognized that the confessions are standards subordinate to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as the Scriptures bear witness to him.

*(Source: BIBLICAL AUTHORITY AND INTERPRETATION,
Primary Reference: GA Minutes 1982: 316-335)*

2. CONTENTION: That the PCUSA has departed from the fundamental belief that Jesus is the only way to salvation.

RESPONSE:

We affirm in accord with the clear evidence of Scripture and our Confession:

- 1. That God's purpose for humankind and for his whole creation is gracious and loving. God's love is universal. God hates evil and wills its defeat. Evil and the rejection of his love are subject to judgment and condemnation. How his loving and holy purpose is ultimately to be realized is beyond our comprehension or understanding. We must not seek to resolve that mystery by the assertion of universalism, or in the fear of universalism deny the universal love that is undeserved by us as sinful creatures.*
- 2. That salvation is God's gracious gift freely offered to undeserving persons. Nothing we do, not even our repentance and faith, has any claim upon God. His gift of life is pure grace. Our proper response is faith, and the realization of salvation in our own existence requires faith. How grace and faith relate is mystery, and we must neither deny that faith is real and necessary for us nor so elevate our believing that its conditions the offer or the completion of God's gracious will.*
- 3. That the motive and message of God's people in witnessing is God's reconciling love in Jesus Christ. We are sent to the world with that good news, and the Holy Spirit works through our proclamation to bring people to salvation. How the Spirit uses our witness to bring people out of sin and into new life is a mystery. We must neither distort the good news of God's love by our words of judgment nor act as though the good news were so evident that our witness is not needed.*
- 4. That God's grace is more powerful than any sin or evil. Our hope rests solely on this confidence. That sin is terrible and subject to God's judgment is also clearly evident from Scripture and the confessional statements. How God works redemption and judgment in the end is the great mystery. Before that mystery of the ultimate future we can live now only in obedience, patience, and hope, believing that sin and death in Adam have been overcome by life and grace in Jesus Christ, the new beginning and the final end.*

*(Source: A STUDY OF UNIVERSALISM,
Study of Universalism: GA Minutes 1974: 133-143)*

Empowered by the Holy Spirit, The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) commits itself

- To announce the good news that in Christ Jesus the world is reconciled to God;*
- To tell all nations and peoples of Christ's call to repentance, faith, and obedience;*
- To proclaim in deed and word that Jesus gave himself to set people free;*
- To offer in Christ's name fullness of life now and forever;*
- To call people everywhere to believe in and follow Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior; and*
- To invite them into the community of faith to worship and serve the triune God.*

*(Source: TURN TO THE LIVING GOD: A CALL TO EVANGELISM IN CHRIST'S WAY,
Primary Reference: GA Minutes 1991: 671-682)*

3. CONTENTION: That the PCUSA has departed from the essential tenets of the faith set forth in the denomination's Book of Confessions.

RESPONSE:

All ordained persons in the PCUSA must affirm in W-4-4003c:

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?

“It is the current understanding that the Reformed Tradition rests on a clear understanding that Jesus Christ alone is Lord of the conscience, and this assertion not only appears in the Form of Government but is supported by the guidance of the Theological Declaration of Barmen. It is also a Reformed affirmation that membership in any worshiping body that claims the label “Reformed” has as its only membership requirement one’s personal faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. ...By requiring a signed agreement of like belief, exist[s] beyond the boundaries of what it is understood to be Reformed.”

Permanent Judicial Commission of the Synod of Southern California and Hawaii (SPJC) in Session of St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church of Santa Barbara, CA, et al v. The Presbytery of Santa Barbara

*“Among the hallmarks of the Reformed faith is an insistence that final authority in the church is found in Scripture alone (sola Scriptura). Thus, the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century was grounded in an emphatic rejection of the Roman Catholic view that the teachings of the church “magisterium” superseded the authority of Scripture as interpreted by individual believers reading under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. (As was summarized in 1546 by the Council of Trent, which was convened by the Pope in response to the Protestant Reformation, Roman Catholic teaching implied “an elevation of the authority of the Church above the authority of the canonized apostolic kerygma [The Bible]. Due to the restrictive localization of the testimonium internum [inward testimony] of the Holy Spirit in the teaching office of the Church, Holy Scripture can only have a mute authority.” Heiko Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1992), p. 286. In contrast, the Reformed tradition has strongly upheld the right and responsibility of the individual believer to read and comprehend Scripture under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.)*

“This principle, sola Scriptura, is often expressed in the Reformed insistence that “God alone is Lord of the conscience” (Westminster Confession of Faith (Book of Confessions § 6.109)). Consistent with this, the PCUSA Constitution Affirms freedom of conscience in the interpretation of Scripture (Book of Order §§ F-3.0101, G-2.0105), declares that it is idolatry to place man-made commands above the convictions of biblically formed conscience (Westminster Shorter Catechism (Book of Confessions § 7.215)), and establishes that believers owe each other mutual forbearance in non-essential matters of conscientious disagreement (Book of Order §§ F-1.0305, F-1.0307).

“Our Reformed confessions are replete with declarations that the individual believer must remain free to interpret Scripture, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, without the burden of interpretations imposed by church authorities. See, e.g., the Scots Confession (Book of Confessions §§ 3.18-3.20) (“so we do not receive uncritically whatever has been declared to men under the name of the general councils, for it is plain that, being human, some of them have manifestly erred, and that in matters of great weight and importance”); the Second Helvetic Confession (Book of Confessions §§ 5.010-5.014, 5.047) (“[W]e do not permit ourselves, in controversies about religion or matters of faith, to urge our case with only the opinions of the fathers or decrees of councils; much less by received customs, or by the large number of those

who share the same opinion, or by the prescription of a long time... [W]e hold that interpretation of the Scripture to be orthodox and genuine which is gleaned from the Scriptures themselves"); and the Westminster Confession of Faith (Book of Confessions §§ 6.010, 6.109-6.111, 6.173-6.175) ("All synods and councils since the apostles' times, whether general or particular, may err, and many have erred; therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith or practice, but to be used as a help in both").

"In his introduction to Reformed theology, the noted conservative R. C. Sproul emphasizes that "only the Bible has the authority to bind the consciences of believers... The right of private interpretation means that every Christian has the right to read and interpret the Bible for himself or herself... God alone is infallible. Fallible authorities cannot bind the conscience absolutely; that right is reserved to God and his Word alone." (R.C. Sproul, *What is Reformed Theology? Understanding the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), pp. 42, 55). Likewise, from the other ends of the theological spectrum, Reformed theologian Donald McKim has written that "[t]hough some Reformed bodies have tended to become more narrow and almost assume that their formulations are the only means of expressing God's truth, this impulse runs counter to the genuine heartbeat of Reformed faith." (Donald K. McKim, *introducing the Reformed Faith* (Louisville: WJK, 2001), p. 7).

"The Reformed heritage honors the ringing, sixteenth-century declaration of Martin Luther when he was on trial before the church – "Here I stand" – and has insisted that the church may impose its views over the individual's conscience only in matters that are truly "essential" to the faith. General Assembly and the GAPJC have emphasized this numerous times in our debates over proper ordination standards. Most recently, in Larson (2012), the GAPJC affirmed that councils must examine candidates on a "case by case basis, after the candidate has been presented and has declared his or her beliefs and stated his or her motives personally and after the examining body has had full opportunity to judge the individual as well as abstract questions of doctrine." (39 Rem. Case 221-04, Larson v. Presbytery of Los Ranchos (GAPJC slip op. Oct. 29, 2012), pp. 3-4.)"

From Session of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church of Santa Barbara, CA
Pre-Trial Brief

4. CONTENTION: That the PCUSA has removed the Biblical standards for ordination in the new Form of Government.

RESPONSE:

Prior to 1997, the requirements for ordination were found in G-6.0106, which read: "To those called to exercise special functions in the church – deacons, elders, and ministers of the Word and Sacrament – God gives suitable gifts for their various duties. In addition to possessing the necessary gifts and abilities, natural and acquired, 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 government body of the church."

In 1997, the additional requirement of "fidelity and chastity" was added to G-6.0106 as section b, which read: "Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life of obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman (W-4.9001), or chastity in singleness. Persons refusing to repent of any self-

acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as deacons, elders, or ministers of the Word and Sacrament.”

So before 1997, only G-6.0106a existed.

In 2011, G-6.0106b was replaced with amendment 10-A, which now reads: “Standards for ordained service reflect the church’s desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Christ in all aspects of life (G-1.0000). The governing body responsible for ordination and/or installation (G-14.0240; 14.0450) shall examine each candidate’s calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability for the responsibilities of office. 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). Governing bodies shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates.”

For another perspective, from an evangelical pastor, the Rev. Jin S. Kim, on the constitutional change, read this:

“On The Not-So-New Ordination Standards”

Posted by: The Presbyterian Outlook, Jul 01, 2011

“On May 10, 2011 The Presbytery of the Twin Cities Area, of which I am a minister member, became the deciding vote to overturn what has been known as the “fidelity/chastity” clause of our constitution with a new amendment: 10-A. I believe that the subsequent claims of our denomination having adopted a “new” ordination standard have been grossly overstated. For almost 300 years the ordaining body, whether the session for elders and deacons or the presbytery for ministers, had latitude to examine candidates for ordination or for transfer of jurisdiction. Denomination-wide standards were in place, of course, but ordaining bodies were expected to use wisdom, discretion and discernment on a case by case basis, a framework formalized by the Adopting Act of 1729, which allowed for candidates to scruple specific confessional claims.

“In 1997 the Presbyterian Church (USA) adopted a nationwide ordination standard that prohibited the ordination of anyone not chaste in singleness or demonstrating fidelity in marriage between a man and a woman. This prohibition forbade pre-marital sex and adultery, but everyone knew that the real targets were homosexual individuals, and the broader LGBT community. As the presenting issue of the day, it made sense to many that an explicit prohibition of homosexual ordination had to be in place. Even as I supported this amendment at the time, I nevertheless had deep concern that we were on a slippery slope of having to proscribe in detail all kinds of new threats to consensus morality.

“Today, my reflections on the life of Jesus lead me to reject both a blanket acceptance of homosexual ordination and a nationwide ban like the “fidelity/chastity” clause that we lived with for 14 years. I suspect that both these approaches leave little room for struggle, tension, and discernment. True discernment requires that we rely wholly on the Holy Spirit in any given situation. We must ask what the letter of the law calls us to, while remaining open to the Spirit of the law in each particular circumstance. The two biblical texts that have helped clarify this for

me are the story of the adulterous woman in John 8:1-11, and the picking of the grain on the Sabbath by Jesus' disciples in Matthew 12:1-8.

"In John 8:1-11, the scribes and the Pharisees bring a woman caught in the act of adultery before Jesus, stating their intent to stone her as the law commands. Jesus, as we know, looks past their adherence to the strict letter of the law, and states, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (v. 7). Following this, the woman's accusers scatter, and Jesus blesses her while still upholding the law: "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

"As a lifelong evangelical, my reading of Scripture does not lead me to believe that homosexuality conforms to God's overall intention for human relating, but I do notice that Jesus blesses the woman at the very moment when all the "righteous" abandoned her, even while calling her behavior sin. Jesus was truly good news to this woman, but we evangelicals have been more preoccupied with judgment than grace. Among all the sins of his generation, Jesus condemned nothing more pointedly than religious hypocrisy. He said that it is better to throw ourselves into the sea than to cause little ones to stumble, and what causes more stumbling of our children the scourge of divorce in America? We Christians get divorced at the same rate as the unbelievers, and is it not heterosexuals who are divorcing and leaving our children at risk? According to Jesus, we are better off dealing with the log in our own eye before fussing with the speck in another's, whether the other is penitent or not.

"My approach is clarified further through Matthew 12:1-8, where Jesus allows his disciples to eat grain on the Sabbath because they were hungry, not because he was instituting a new law about the Sabbath. He upholds the law before the Pharisees, even as he allows his disciples to transgress it through his own reading of the Hebrew Scriptures. For Jesus it seems that the law exists to serve people, not the other way around. Thus, he tells the Pharisees, "If you had know what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless" (v. 7). I believe this biblical example calls us to the challenging task of discernment in each specific situation, making room for exceptions. Councils of the church appointed to ordain officers should be given the latitude to discern whether certain people of God are genuinely "hungry", like Jesus' disciples on the Sabbath. Just as Jesus made an exception for his disciples while upholding the traditional teaching on the Sabbath, an ordaining body ought to be able to make an exception for a faithful LGBT person while upholding the normativity of our constitutional heritage.

"My primary concern, then, is to not use LGBT people to bolster an ideological agenda, whether on the Left or the Right, but to relate to each person deeply, and prayerfully discern what is called for in each particular situation. This allows us to move beyond the tyranny of absolutism – total denial or total acceptance – to respecting the true calling of a church council: to discern together the will of God.

"The passage of 10-A ends a 14-year fling with a very specific nationwide prohibition of a particular behavior, and returns the PCUSA to our 300 year (1706-1997) tradition of entrusting the local ordaining body with the grave responsibility of examination, ordination and validation. We will need to learn to live with this latitude, and remember that part of what it means to be a mainline church is to be in fellowship with those we do not agree with. It remains true that no

congregation or presbytery is required to receive a person ordained by another body, and so our freedom to exercise our conscience endures. But I do pray that our denomination will not descend into some theological balkanization. I believe that our confessions, liturgy and proclamation should reflect the historical standard of monogamous, heterosexual marriage, but I also want to warn against mandating a nationwide constitutional prohibition of whatever we consider the moral scourge of the day, as if God were captive to our passing passions. We need to trust local ordaining bodies to do the difficult but faithful work of discernment, even if we disagree with the results. In spite of our decline, that's one reason I remain a mainline Presbyterian Christian – it's the church I signed up for, after all."