

## WHAT HAPPENED AT GENERAL ASSEMBLY - 2012- AND WHY ARE SOME SO CONCERNED?

When Stockton Presbytery last gathered in town hall format in March of this year we spoke of the many issues facing the PCUSA and the potential for a perfect storm in the Church. We indicated that our approach would be to attend General Assembly (GA), work hard, support Stockton's overtures and those of other Presbyteries seeking to recover an orthodox biblical stand for the PCUSA and then to gather again to take stock.

We want to give you an update on what has transpired with regard to those issues both the GA and within our ecclesiastic judicial system as they bear on the elements of what was then thought to be a gathering potential "perfect storm".

From our March paper the issues we discussed then as having potential impact on the future of the PCUSA are included below in red (each is also underlined). Current updates and comments follow each section in black.

We said in March:

Expectations – There are significant issues of belief and practice facing the church in the next six months. Some have euphemistically referred to the possibility of a “perfect storm”:

A. It is possible the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission (GAPJC) will adversely decide a case known as Parnell v. Presbytery of San Francisco. The question of the case is: do either or both the Scriptures or the Confessions clearly forbid certain sexual conduct as sinful as Christian orthodoxy has defined it for two millennia;

The GAPJC decided the Parnell case (Larges ordination case) in April of 2012. The GAPJC specifically held that neither scripture nor the confessions could be definitively interpreted to conclude that "certain sexual relationships were prohibited" (referring to same sex relationships). This was based on their finding that the PCUSA simply had no consensus on scriptural or confessional interpretation with regard to sexual relationships. They therefore concluded that no, "doctrinal error by errant interpretation of Scripture and Confessions" occurred. This decision has the authority of an Authoritative Interpretation (AI) and clears the way for ordinations that would have been previously challenged. There are no further appeals which might change this, only legislative changes at GA. The ordination issue is important but the actual decision is worse than we thought possible. The case boldly states that where a disagreement occurs on interpretation of either the scripture or the confessions no definitive statement about those scripture or confessional passages may be made. In essence there can no longer be an orthodox interpretation of anything.

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B. The definition of Christian marriage may be changed either by direct constitutional amendment or by Authoritative Interpretation;

1. Authoritative Interpretation (AI)- To their credit the GA Committee on Marriage and Civil Unions never seriously considered the approval of an AI interpreting the Book of Order definition as authorizing pastors to perform marriages in states where it is legal. They recognized this would change the definition of marriage without referral to the Presbyteries for approval. There were attempts on the plenary floor to take up the issue when the main definition failed but they were soundly defeated.

2. Marriage Definition - The overtures to change the definition of marriage as being between one man and one woman to "two people" passed in committee 28 to 24 but was narrowly defeated on the plenary floor by 30 votes (16 switched votes would have passed it). This issue was greatly contested with two evangelical minority reports being soundly rejected setting the stage for the close vote. We will come back to this when we discuss a new and even more problematic element of the storm : the Confessions.

C. the Board of Pensions may decide to provide same sex partner or marriage benefit and tax the congregations to pay for it;

The BOP in fact extended same sex benefits to domestic same sex partners. This includes medical and related insurance, retirement, survivors pension benefits, and disability. The BOP considered and rejected Stockton's relief of conscience overture 50-3 in committee and 501-130 on the floor! The Overture would have created a separate benefit package without same sex benefits for those electing out of the current program. Our overture nevertheless caused quite a stir. Heavy hitters from the Advisory Committee on the Constitution (ACC), the Stated Clerks Office, and the BOP came to testify against the matter. The BOP corporate president did commit to a relief of conscience provision when they had "financial experience on which to base it". Such an action could take years. To date they have not even studied this issue as no financial, actuarial, participation survey, or coverage studies have been launched let alone completed.

D. The Kenyon precedent may be reasserted on the issues of marriage and ordination to require local compliance;

1. After the adoption of the new PCUSA Book Of Order (BoO) in 2011, all former decisions of the GA and the GAPJC were eliminated subject to review and re-adoption at the 2012 GA. The Kenyon Case itself was not proposed for ratification by the GA AI review Committee, not because its principles were rejected, but because they have been amended into the BoO. The Kenyon case stands for the proposition that local governing bodies and pastors must comply with changes adopted by the GA or the GAPJC unless specifically exempted. When the Book of Order was amended (final in 2011) eliminating specific requirements for ordination generally referred to as "fidelity and Chastity". A general statement replaced it which was understood (but not codified) to allow each governing body to decide eligibility for ordination on its own standards. Following this decision Stockton Presbytery adopted its own local principles. Those are set out in Stockton's Manual of Operations which re-adopts the former "fidelity

and chastity" standard for ordination, the Committee on Ministry (COM) statement on pastoral calls, and the statement of Essential Tenets and Reformed Distinctives.

2. Stockton's overture 7-10 to actually guarantee in the BoO the right of Sessions and Presbyteries to establish principles as a matter of conscience including traditional ordination standards was defeated in Committee 37-13 with a comment. GA agreed and rejected it on a voice vote WITH the comment reminding sessions and presbyteries that these matters were subject to review by higher bodies i.e. PJC challenge. This has clear implications for continued local option especially because of a pending judicial case.

3. Los Ranchos Presbytery - was sued in the Southern California SPJC regarding its adoption of a manual and ordination processes that reflected their local commitment to orthodox biblical understanding. Los Ranchos prevailed on a split decision. Had our overture passed Presbyteries, including Los Ranchos and Stockton would have been immunized from challenge. Los Ranchos (and all evangelical Presbyteries) now must face an appeal to the GAPJC in October. If this decision is reversed no Presbytery or Session may hold to its own ordination standard. The Kenyon principle will be back as it relates to ordination. Stockton will be among those impacted.

E. The GA may not adopt the ordination changes to restore standards or any of the relief of conscience requests for issues of departure, union model reorganization, non-geographic presbyteries, use of alternate benefit plans, or property matters.

1. No matter before the GA requesting relief of conscience was approved.

2. No matter attempting to create a new way of connecting churches other than the traditional geographic model was approved. Indeed they were all resoundingly rejected, including most of the proposals from the MID-Council Commission itself.

3. Alternate medical and pension plans designed to provide plans that did not fund abortion or same sex benefits were overwhelmingly rejected. Interestingly, a Commissioners resolution instructing the Stated Clerk, in cooperation with the Board of Pensions (BOP), to explore a dialogue with EPC and ECO on a joint benefits plan narrowly passed 319/311/8 after the Stated Clerk and President of the BOP lobbied for it.

F. \*\*\*(new issue) That brings us to the new issue of the viability of the Confessions.

As one might expect this issue is closely related to the issues of ordination and marriage. But at this GA the issue of property became, at least procedurally, entangled with the confessions.

A. In dealing with local church property, the property Overture from Stockton would have limited the application of the trust clause in the BoO to the benefit of a particular congregation. It would also have limited ecclesiastic suits over property when a congregation departs the PCUSA after a 2/3 vote. Dr. Paul Hooker, the Executive Presbyter of St. Augustine Presbytery the ACC elected (and now termed out) representative in the Polity committee testified extensively for 34 minutes. Stockton's Overture

Advocate was given 3 minutes to address the committee. The overture was soundly rejected in the Polity Committee.

\*\*\* When the overture came to the GA floor during the committee report a commissioner asked for an opinion that the overture was out of order because it conflicted with another part of the constitution. The overture refers to a congregational meeting for dismissal and that subject is not among the specific subjects delineated by the BoO for congregational meetings. Dr. Hooker, speaking for the ACC as a whole, opined that the overture was unconstitutional because of that apparent conflict though this never came up in the Polity committee for which he was the ACC representative. The Moderator ruled it out of order and it was not challenged. So much for that.

B. Later, the Marriage overtures were taken up and an evangelical commissioner picked up on that constitutional conflict theme and asked the Moderator, following the precedent of the property decision, to rule the marriage matters out of order and strike them from the docket because they directly contradicted at least three confessions: Heidelberg Catechism, Second Helvetic Confession and the Confession of 1967. They each define marriage as occurring between one man and one woman and are part of the constitution found in the Book of Confessions!

\*\*\*At the request of the Stated Clerk and on behalf of the ACC, Dr. Hooker opined that the Confessions are themselves internally inconsistent (without giving examples). Without mentioning the case by name he took up the theme of Parnell about differing interpretations of the confessions, suggesting we do not have a single view of what they mean and therefore we do not use them as a "rule book". Without any authority or citation to precedent Dr. Hooker then opined on behalf of the ACC that the confessions do not need to be amended to change the Book of Order when there is a conflict. This is a 180° turn from his property answer. (Observation: This is not surprising in that Dr. Hooker's recent book, First and Second Chronicles a Westminster Bible Companion Commentary, argues that the chronicles are not a history of Israel at all, but rather a theological reflection of Israel's faith. Seems Dr. Hooker is comfortable with ignoring plain meaning.)

\*\* Based on that answer the Stated Clerk advised the Moderator on the question of the marriage issues being in order. The Moderator ruled that the confessions did not control the outcome of the issue. Another commissioner appealed the Moderator's decision to the floor where it was overwhelmingly upheld by 70 - 30%. The GA voted that neither the scripture nor the confessions speak with authority on the issue of marriage!

C. Stockton's Overture regarding Ordination to replace the new generic standard, not with the old fidelity and chastity language, but with the language from the Heidelberg Catechism: 108 (BoC 4.108) requiring us to lead a "chaste and disciplined life whether in holy marriage between one man and one woman or in singleness" - was rejected in committee by a 75/25% margin and by a voice vote on the floor. Again rejecting plainly worded language from the Confessions.

\*\*\* For practical purposes this likely ends any real chance of reversing the issue of ordination standards.

**More than anything else coming out of this GA it is clear that the Confessions, intended to be a bulwark of our understanding of scripture, have been eviscerated! The PCUSA can really no longer call itself a confessional church because of its current lack of commitment to its own confessions.**

**The Parnell ordination case ignored the Confessions as they relate to sexual behavior rendering them impotent by claiming we have a disagreement about them and so they have no effect.**

**The rejection of the Heidelberg Confession as authoritative in matters of Christian manner of life, related to joyfully submitting to the will of Christ as a qualification for ordination, was clear.**

**Last, but certainly not least, and perhaps more troubling than any other example, the direct vote on the floor of the GA to ignore the Confessions dealing with the definition of marriage ended the authority of the Confessions.**

As the PCUSA, we are no longer able to claim the mantra of the reformation which begins with scripture alone. Parnell and the actions of this GA declare that when we disagree we cannot know what scripture means even when it is apparently clear. We are not talking nuance here, or cultural, linguistic, or historical enlightenment. This is about the rejection of plain meaning. In many parts of the church we cannot even say "Faith Alone Christ Alone or Grace Alone" as we tolerate within the church teachings that suggest Christ is our savior but we cannot know about how others might be saved. Some even argue a knowledge of Christ besides the Christ revealed in scripture.

Without a commitment to scripture, without a confessional distinctive, and without the mantle of a reformed church the PCUSA has ceased to be Presbyterian. The PCUSA has departed from its spiritual roots and from the truth. May God help us as we consider what to do next.