

Response to the Letters of Chain-O-Lakes and Marsh (Draft)

Dear Fathers and Brothers of our Presbytery,

At our January 2007 meeting the request was made for the Candidates and Credentials Committee to respond to letters from the Chain-O-Lakes session and from the Rev. Frank Marsh. The letter from Chain-O-Lakes (Communication #4) is reproduced below:

Dec. 4, 2006

To the Clerk and Moderator of the Presbytery of Michigan and Ontario

It has come to our attention that at the September Presbytery meeting an assertion was made from the floor of Presbytery by a presbyter in the nature of: "GA recommended that we should not disqualify a man from licensure solely because he holds the firework view." The purpose of this communication is to ask some questions regarding this.

First, where would we find documentation supporting this? The recommendations that were adopted by GA in 2004 do not address things in this manner. Our presbyters that were present at the meeting assumed that assertion to be accurate but we can find no support for it.

Second, we would ask that this would be looked into on a presbytery level so that the entire presbytery might understand how this should or should not affect future examinations.

We acknowledge that assertions should ideally be challenged at the time they are made. But we feel this assertion in many ways unnecessarily intimidates presbyters who should be voting their conscience before God Almighty. Although it is not our intention to challenge the vote that has already taken place we feel it is important to point out a possibly incorrect assumption that, if incorrect, should not be used to manipulate future votes. However, even if it were true that GA has supported that kind of assertion, is it their place to tell men how they should vote in a Presbyterian form of government?

In Christ's Service,  
The Session of the Chain-O-Lakes OPC  
/s/ Jonas Chupp

The letter from the Rev. Frank Marsh concerns the recommendations of the GA Study Committee as well. In his letter (Communication #12) Mr. Marsh says, "I am writing to request that the Candidates and Credentials Committee incorporate the recommendations of the Committee to Study the Views of Creation."

In order to respond to these letters, the committee would like to address five points. First, what is the authority of a Study Committee Report from GA? Second, what are the recommendations of the GA report for the examination of

candidates? Third, what does the report say regarding the voting of presbyters and conscience? Fourth, how have the Candidates and Credentials incorporated the recommendations of the report? And fifth, some suggestions from the committee to our Presbytery on how the issue of Creation might be handled going forward.

### 1. The Authority of the GA Study Committee Report

The Westminster Confession says (31.2):

It belongeth to synods and councils, ministerially to determine controversies of faith, and cases of conscience; to set down rules and directions for the better ordering of the public worship of God, and government of his church; to receive complaints in cases of maladministration, and authoritatively to determine the same: which decrees and determinations, if consonant to the Word of God, are to be received with reverence and submission; not only for their agreement with the Word, but also for the power whereby they are made, as being an ordinance of God appointed thereunto in his Word.

This section of the confession gives the highest court of the church authority to make determinations, and describes the responsibility of church office-bearers to receive their determinations with “reverence and submission.” The Confession seems to recognize three different categories of determinations: doctrinal controversies, ordering of the worship of the church, and judicial appeals. Historically General Assemblies have also considered questions of an abstract or general nature. Their answers to this sort of questions are called “*in thesi* deliverances.”

Dr. C.N. Willborn of Greenville Seminary recently published an article in *The Confessional Presbyterian* (2005) entitled “The ‘Ministerial and Declarative’ Powers of the Church and *In Thesi* Deliverances.” In this article he gives a historical summary of the debate concerning the authority of *in thesi* deliverances. He then makes some observations regarding the authority of *in thesi* deliverances in the PCA.

Dr. Willborn says in his conclusion that “...there is great reason for an *in thesi* deliverance of the General Assembly to obligate every presbyter and presbytery to consider and apply the ‘pious advice’ of the gathered Assembly of divines. Why should *in thesi* deliverances not be considered ‘pious’ and be taken seriously? After all, the ecclesiastical office-bearers of the church have issued a deliverance they believe to be consistent with their constitutional documents.”

Dr. Willborn then makes a distinction between *in thesi* deliverances and judicial decisions of the Assembly. The judicial decisions of the Assembly are the “final redress of a specific matter.” There is no higher court and no higher appeal.

Therefore when the Assembly delivers a judicial decision on a specific matter “she speaks with her ultimate authoritative voice.”

However *in thesi* deliverances, such as the Creation Study Report, are not specific to a case and they are not a final appeal. Therefore they do not have the authority of a judicial pronouncement. But does that mean they are mere suggestions or recommendations? No. *In thesi* deliverances do have authority because they are the voice of the church speaking in harmony with her own constitutional documents.

It would seem that our General Assembly takes the same view concerning the authority of *in thesi* deliverances. The OPC web site states, “General Assembly papers are thoughtful and weighty treatises on important matters but do not have the force of constitutional documents, namely, our Confession of Faith and Catechisms and Book of Church Order.”

The Rev. Donald Duff’s introductory letter to the Creation Study Report indicates that the Report was “received” by the General Assembly. The use of this word reflects an understanding of the authority of the document similar to that described here. This may also be observed in the words used for the four recommendations: “recommend,” “urge,” “encourage,” and “refer.” The GA is expressing the mind of the church, but without the finality of a judicial pronouncement.

Dr. Willborn quotes Dr. Brian Chapell of Covenant Seminary: “In actuality, the GA makes such statements to advise its members and churches of the mind of the larger church at that moment. While such action does not have the authority of law to bind conscience or future Assemblies, brothers in Christ are obligated to weigh with great deference this ‘pious advice’ since they have vowed to seek the peace and purity of the church...”

In conclusion, the Creation Study Report has great weight because it speaks the mind of the church in harmony with her constitutional documents. However because it is not regarding a specific case it is not the final word on any specific matter. We have an obligation as Presbyterian office-bearers to seek solutions to issues regarding Creation in a way that seeks the benefit of our church as whole.

## **2. Recommendations for the Examination of Candidates**

The 71<sup>st</sup> General Assembly passed the following motions:

1. That the General Assembly recommend that presbyteries should expect a ministerial candidate to articulate his view on the days of creation with a proper recognition of the hermeneutical, exegetical, and confessional considerations involved. The following kinds

of questions should be used by presbyteries when examining a candidate, whatever his view of the days of creation, in order to show that his doctrine of creation is consistent with Scripture and the subordinate standards:

A. Does the candidate affirm the following and can he articulate what he understands by them:

1. creation ex nihilo
2. the federal headship of Adam
3. the covenant of works
4. the doctrine of the Sabbath
5. the sufficiency and perspicuity of Scripture
6. the historicity of the creation account

B. Does the candidate understand and affirm the priority of Scripture in the relationship between special and general revelation?

C. Does the candidate understand and affirm the hermeneutical principles that are expressed in Scripture and in the subordinate standards?

D. Is the candidate able to address and refute the errors of the theory of evolution both exegetically and theologically?

E. Can the candidate articulate and affirm the covenantal structure of the plan of redemption as found in Genesis 1-3?

2. That the General Assembly urge members of presbyteries and sessions to uphold the peace of the church by addressing theological issues within the church primarily through educational, administrative, judicial, or other constitutional means, and not merely by voting for or against candidates for office.

### 3. Voting and Conscience according to the Report

The issue of voting and conscience is addressed in the body of the Report. “To be a commissioner, then, means not voting as you believe that the body which sent you would have you vote but voting as you believe that you should before God. Commissioners then must, *coram Deo*, faithfully discharge their consciences in the face of all discussion and debate.” (lines 2969-2972)

The report then explores the question of a commissioner who feels unable to vote for a candidate because he feels that the position of the candidate is not in conformity to the Standards. The Report observes, “the heart of confessionalism is that the church as a corporate entity reads the Bible together. Similarly, there is a greater concern than simply that of one’s own private conscience formed by Scripture and it is that of the corporate conscience also formed by Scripture, as read together by the church. The function of the *animus imponentis* reminds us that the church also has a corporate conscience which guides the exercise of individual conscience.” (lines 2986-2990)

The Report then describes the duty of presbyters to give weight to the mind of the church. “While it is true that a commissioner’s vote is inviolate and he must give account of it ultimately to God, he should not vote for a man whose confessional divergence he believes to be detrimental to the purity, peace and

unity of the church. On the other hand, a commissioner should also be mindful of what the church as a whole regards as deleterious to its purity, peace and unity. Thus a commissioner should be very slow to vote against a candidate solely on grounds which the rest of the church finds perfectly acceptable. At least if and when a commissioner does so he ought to be fully cognizant that his position is at variance with the *animus imponentis*.” (lines 2995-3002) While some presbyters might find the phrases “rest of the church” and “perfectly acceptable” infelicitous, the duty of commissioners to weigh the mind of the church is clear.

On the other hand, the Report does not wish to restrict the conscience of any commissioner. “All that having been said, no one may ever instruct a commissioner how to vote in the case of candidates seeking licensure/ordination. Nor should anyone presume to know the basis for such a personal decision (why any given commissioner voted as he did) short of a clear, express declaration on the part of the commissioner.” (lines 3008-3013)

It may be noted that this part of the Report reflects an understanding of the authority of the Report similar to that described above.

#### **4. The Candidates and Credentials Committee**

In response to Mr. Marsh’s concerns, we would note that the Committee has incorporated the recommendations of the Creation Study Report in two ways.

First, the committee has prepared a Theological Questionnaire for all candidates to complete. This questionnaire includes most of the points mentioned in the motions passed by GA. (Also included are the recommendations of the Report on Justification and some more general questions.) The candidate’s responses to the questionnaire will be used in the preparation of the in-committee theological interview and any weaknesses would be explored at that time.

The committee did not include all of the points mentioned in the recommendation because we wanted our questionnaire to cover a broader range of topics. Nonetheless, all the major points of the Creation and Justification reports are included.

Second, the committee wishes to spend time with each candidate with a view towards evaluating their teachability on these issues. The committee has noted that some candidates show a marked willingness to work with office-bearers who hold other views, and learn together with them. Other candidates seem less tractable.

The committee also feels a responsibility to ascertain that each candidate we recommend to presbytery has an acceptable understanding of the issues surrounding Creation. In particular we desire that there is an understanding of the hermeneutical and exegetical issues involved. When we put a candidate forward, that does not imply that the committee is unanimously in agreement with the candidate's views on Creation. It does mean that the committee has evaluated the candidate's views according to the GA recommendations and found them acceptable in reference to those recommendations. The decision on whether the candidate should be licensed or ordained belongs to the presbytery alone.

## 5. Suggestions

It is important that the presbytery should not develop its theology during the examination of candidates. Or, stated another way, candidates should not be made to feel they are caught in a cross-fire when they are examined. While each presbyter may have particular issues that he is concerned to address, the point of the examination is to ascertain the doctrines and views of the candidate.

Some presbyters have suggested that, instead of asking candidates leading questions, that they should be asked, "Please state your position on Creation." This has the advantages of clarity and succinctness. If presbyters wish to ask follow-up questions from the floor they are free to do so. Leading questions should be used sparingly and judiciously.

It might be helpful for the subject of Creation to be discussed and studied by the presbytery outside of our regular meetings. If presbyters are interested in seeing further discussion on the subject, the Christian Education Committee of presbytery is charged with fostering the educational ministry of the regional church. As an example of such interest, the presbytery held a fellowship meeting on the subject of creation several years ago.

## Conclusions

In reply to Rev. Marsh's letter, the Candidates and Credentials Committee has taken steps to incorporate the recommendations of the Creation Study report in our procedures.

In reply to Mr. Chupp's letter, committee would point out that the Creation Study Report, considered as an *in thesi* deliverance of the church, deserves great weight in the deliberations of our presbytery. The report encourages presbyters to not vote against candidates simply because of their position on Creation.

However the report respects the duty of presbyters to vote according to their consciences before God.

The Report concludes with an appeal that those “presbyters who wish to change the *animus* (mind) of the church on any issue should probably focus first on teaching.” (line 3036) The Chain-O-Lakes session is to be commended for endeavoring to do so by their mailing of their letter and booklet. It is to be hoped that our presbytery’s discussion of this topic will continue and be profitable to all.