

Executive Presbyter's Report to the Presbytery of Grand Canyon
Faith Presbyterian Church, Sun City, AZ
March 7, 2003

Some rather strident voices in our denomination have proclaimed that the Presbyterian Church (USA) is in a constitutional crisis over the alleged lack of enforcement of G-6.0106b, the fidelity and chastity clause in the Book of Order. How seriously should we take this claim? From my perspective, this supposed crisis is not nearly as serious as these critics make it out to be, but constitutional non-compliance is nevertheless far more prevalent than has been reported.

There are approximately 11,150 congregations in our denomination. The sessions that have announced defiance of G-6.0106b amount to about one twentieth of one percent of all our congregations. And virtually all of the defiant ones are involved in some form of judicial process within the structure of the denomination to address their alleged offenses. Does this make for a constitutional crisis? Even if we doubled that number to account for the possibility of other churches in defiance that haven't shown up yet on any radar screen, it would mean that 99.9% of our congregations are complying with the constitution on this particular matter. That's better than Ivory Soap, which only claims to be 99 and 44/100 % pure.

The number of ministers accused of intent to disobey G-6.0106b or of violating it through personal behavior is around twenty out of more than 21,000. That's also less than one tenth of one percent. This is not to excuse anyone who flaunts the constitution, but this number falls far short of epidemic proportions.

However, there are reportedly about 300 congregations, a far more significant number, that are not in compliance with the constitution, specifically with G-14.0201, by refusing to ordain women to their sessions. One of them is in this presbytery. Not only do they fail to comply with this provision, but some refuse even to apply for the waiver (as provided in G-14.0202a) by which a presbytery may grant them a temporary reprieve from this particular ordination standard. The arguments I've heard from church leaders attempting to justify this breach of the constitution have been based on cultural considerations and not on theology or Scripture.

So, maybe we have the stirrings of a crisis when hundreds of churches are allowed to ignore the constitution in this way. Officials I've spoken with about this problem say they want to approach the matter with patience and pastoral sensitivity. But maybe they're being too nice. Maybe we should enforce this provision of the constitution with a strong hand.

There are, if the Book of Order is being followed, 173 Committees on

Ministry in our denomination, since there are 173 presbyteries, and the Book of Order requires each presbytery to have such a committee. G-11.0502c says that Committee on Ministry shall visit with every session within its bounds at least once every three years. I have direct personal knowledge that Committees on Ministry often fail to do this, and yet I have never heard of a session filing a remedial action with the stated clerk for this act of non-compliance with the constitution. Why is that?

There must be thousands of pastors who routinely disregard the constitution of the church by allowing, even inviting, unbaptized people to partake of the Lord's Supper. The pastors I've spoken with about this are all unrepentant about doing so.

It has come to my attention that many of our church sessions continue to defy the ordination standard in G-14.0205. This says that the session shall confer with newly elected elders and deacons about their willingness to assume office, and after a period of study and preparation the session shall examine them as to their knowledge of doctrine, church government, etc. Some sessions do a responsible job of training and examining new elders and deacons, but many simply ignore this constitutional mandate, recruiting and ordaining anyone who is willing to serve. As a result, a large number of elders making decisions about the work of our churches know little about the Reformed Tradition and Presbyterian polity. This is not an indictment of these elders. They are fine people, willing servants of the church, who care about their congregations, but they have been deprived of the educational tools they need to be faithful and effective elders.

W-3.3101(1) in our Book of Order says Scripture shall be read and proclaimed in the Lord's Day worship. Sadly I must report that I have attended Sunday worship in this presbytery where Scripture was not read, much less proclaimed. My analysis is that the reading of Scripture was eliminated to make the worship contemporary, because the only times I've encountered this omission have been in contemporary worship services.

The same paragraph also says Scripture shall be interpreted in a sermon or other form of exposition. The perpetrators who disregard this constitutional requirement cover the theological spectrum far right, far left and everything in between. I can't begin to count the number of sermons I've heard that totally ignored the Bible texts that were read in worship. People in the pews are hungry for understanding of the Bible. Interpretation of Scripture, based on sound scholarship, is one of the cornerstones of the Reformed Tradition. It's what we are noted for within the family of Christian denominations. Our constitution mandates interpretation of Scripture as part of the Lord's Day worship. Why is it so often ignored?

W-1.4007 uses the word shall in describing the session's duty to provide

regular study of the Directory for Worship in the education of church officers. How many sessions fulfill this requirement?

Too many sessions fail to comply with G-10.0401 by allowing the offering to be counted and deposited by only one person and by not conducting a full financial review every year. Many also fail to elect a treasurer each year and do not maintain records of all financial transactions. This lack of financial oversight is not only foolhardy but is dangerous. The potential for damage to the church as a result of failing to keep this constitutional requirement is very great. Why, then, do so many churches take these unconstitutional financial risks?

Well, maybe we do have a constitutional crisis, after all. But it's not the one the Layman has written about. It's not a crisis of defiance. It's a crisis of apathy. It's a crisis of convenient shortcuts. It's a crisis of individual desires trumping connectional traditions. It's a crisis of rampant congregationalism. So, what's going on? Why do we have such a hard time following the rules?

One factor is that the PC(USA) is a voluntary organization. People join because they want to, and members of our churches and ministers are free to leave at any time they decide to do so. Churches do not have the same coercive powers that secular governments do. We can't fine or imprison people for failing to keep church law. We choose to live and work together in covenantal relationships, but we routinely ignore some of those covenants when it comes to the fine details of how we do this in real life. Parties among us with particular agendas pick and choose which parts of the constitution they will conveniently overlook and which parts they will defend with all their might and main. Presbyterians from the far left to the far right are guilty on this count. Various constituencies within our denomination will interpret certain parts of our constitution literally and other parts figuratively, sometimes making the change in hermeneutical approach within the span of a single paragraph.

Friends, we do have a problem carrying out the requirements of our constitution with consistency. Some may be tempted to solve the problem through increased strong enforcement, and others may see the answer in benign neglect of the Book of Order. Neither approach will produce satisfactory results. I do not advocate ignoring the Book of Order, and I certainly do not advocate defying it. Over the years I've spent countless hours and much energy defending the Book of Order against the efforts of Pastor Nominating Committees and sessions that were trying hard to get around it. But as with every other dimension of the Christian life, we need to approach our constitution with a sense of grace.

We all know that the Book of Order is not perfect, and some of its arcane requirements make life difficult for small congregations. And it keeps

changing. It is revised always revising. Maybe that's part of the problem, because of the frustration in trying to keep up with all the rule changes that occur every year.

Yet the Book of Order does stand for something wise and important in our life together. And we need to honor it as a sign of our commitment to the Reformed faith. As a practical reality and as a symptom of our sinfulness, we will never be able to live in perfect obedience to the Book of Order. As Calvinists, we know that all too well, and a little honest confession about the limitations of the regulations we create year after year might do the church a great deal of good.

Still, when sisters or brothers among us fail seriously to abide by our covenant agreements, we need to do something. So we have judicial remedies and disciplinary procedures. I believe church discipline is a necessary part of our life together, but it must not be initiated lightly. My inclination is to use the Rules of Discipline sparingly, although I recognize others have a more activist temperament when it comes to judicial matters.

In any event, the wheels of our Presbyterian judicial process grind slowly and deliberately. Some people are impatient and want the courts to act fast, but they don't. The church courts are designed to protect the interests of all parties and to arrive in due course at reasoned judgments about matters of conflict.

In the government of the United States, attempts by presidents and Congress to short circuit the process or get around the court system have been ruled unconstitutional. Likewise in the Presbyterian Church (USA), calls for denominational staff to intervene in Permanent Judicial Commission business are out of order. In the church as in the larger society, there will always be some who act rashly. It then falls to the thoughtful and mature among us to deal with the consequences. Wisdom lies in the careful exercise of restraint and in the cultivation of patience. Rapid and reckless remedies do not produce satisfactory solutions.

Rather than cry out impatiently about a constitutional crisis, it would be better, I believe, for everyone to calm down and trust the church's judicial process to do its deliberative work. But even then, when all the controversial PJC cases have been decided, the results will not be 100% perfect. The Church is made up of imperfect human beings, so there is little chance that everyone will be pleased with the various ways these cases will be decided. Our Book of Order acknowledges that ecclesiastical bodies may err. And no doubt over the years some have made egregious errors. Nevertheless, if our denominational history is any guide, most of the time we get it mostly right, and that's as good as it gets for Calvinists.

Upon reflection, we don't have a constitutional crisis in the church. What

we have is everyday life in a broken world. So let's stay together and get on with it, using every ounce of grit and grace God has imparted to us. Thank you, and God bless our imperfect but dearly loved Presbyterian Church (USA).

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