

**The 'Vow #8 Impasse'
in the
Reformed Presbyterian
Church of North America**

A RESPONSE

to the

**Report of the Special Committee on the Vow#8 Impasse
to be presented to**

**The Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church
meeting at**

Franklin, Indiana, July 10-16, 1993

GORDON J. KEDDIE

Preface

When I accepted God's call to pastor the Reformed Presbyterian congregation in State College, it was largely a fellowship of graduate students. All but a very few were scheduled to move away within one to four years. Not one of our three elders and two deacons was then in a permanent employment situation. Only four of the members had been born in the RP Church -- a number that today stands at three. This was a new, young and very transient group with a commitment to the Reformed Faith in general but with little acquaintance with the Reformed Presbyterian Church in particular. Just to maintain our numbers, we needed 15-25% growth every year. By God's grace, we exceeded that most years. Of the 27 members and adherents who signed my Call, only 8 remain -- and two of them only recently returned to State College after an absence of five years. Nevertheless, apart from term-time students, the in-bounds fellowship now numbers some 36 adults and 31 children. Regular attendances are from 60-80.

About the time I came, two families moved to the area for employment and became involved in the church. In 1987, one man was elected an elder and the other a deacon. (See Appendix 1) The latter, Dr. Don Streit, was and is a godly man, exemplary in the gifts for and work of the diaconate - above reproach, worthy of respect, hospitable, 'not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, uncontentious,' and one who knows 'how to manage his own household.' When the Session examined Dr. Streit for the office, he said he could not take the abstinence clause of Vow #8, on account of its not being required by God in his Word. The elders weighed the matter very carefully in the light of the Word, the law of the RPCNA and the vital interests of the work in State College, not forgetting the congregation's overwhelming recognition of Dr. Streit's gifts. The Testimony had been changed in 1980 and enjoined rather than required total abstinence. A majority of

Synod

had voted for a change in Vow #8 in 1986, to bring that into line with the Testimony (although it had failed on overture). The 1987 Book of Church Government had excised all references to this requirement for officebearers (as they had appeared in the 1945 BCG). In 1975, a deacon in North Hills RPC had renounced the vow and was still a deacon there twelve years later. We were a young congregation in urgent need of Dr. Streit's gifts for office. We believed he was God's man and we saw no biblical basis to deny him office or to present to the congregation as grounds for his ineligibility. In the light of these factors and in the firm belief that refusing office to Dr Streit might well irreparably impede the progress of the congregation, the elders unanimously allowed him an exception on the abstinence clause of the vow. In the ordination, the whole vow was put to him, and the exception noted and explained to the congregation. The action was recorded faithfully in the Session Minutes for review by Presbytery. In 1989, in very similar circumstances, Mr Cyrus Beisel (now our Treasurer) was allowed the same exception and installed as a deacon (he had previously been ordained an elder in the PCUSA). This too was recorded in the Session Minutes.

In the years since Don Streit and Cy Beisel became deacons the congregation has made significant progress. With Tim Johnson and the late Howard McConaughy, they formed a fully functioning diaconate in the congregation. The congregation went off Presbytery aid years ahead of earlier projections and has steadily become a fellowship of settled families, as opposed to graduate students. People with physical and financial needs have been ministered to by these deacons. A new church building was purchased debt-free and is being completely re-modelled (only partly with borrowed monies). During these years, two spiritual sons of the congregation have entered the RP ministry (Tom Houston and Mark England), while a third is attending Covenant Seminary this year (Daryl Madi). A number of families who came into the RPC in State College have moved on to become members of RP churches across the country. God has blessed us in many ways -- some of you have also tasted the fruit directly -- and the

elders are in no doubt that the labors of our deacons have been a major part in this process.

The elders believe that to have denied their active participation as deacons on unscriptural grounds would have seriously damaged the congregation. They further believe that insisting upon the imposition on these men of Vow #8 now -- especially in view of the unscriptural nature of the abstinence requirement will irreparably damage the Reformed Presbyterian witness in State College.

The Report of the Special Committee on [the] Vow #8 Impasse presented to the 1993 Reformed Presbyterian Synod calls for the Presbytery of the Alleghenies and the St. Lawrence Presbytery to exercise ecclesiastical discipline against those congregations within their bounds that have ordained and installed office-bearers with exceptions to the total abstinence clause in ordination vow #8. This booklet constitutes the response to this Report of the elders of the Grace R.P. Church of State College, PA, although we trust it will equally serve the interests of others who have ordained officers with such exceptions. It is also an appeal for relief in a controversy that has profoundly affected the RP denomination in recent decades. Until 1980, R.P. church members were required to pledge themselves to total abstinence from the use of alcoholic beverages. The present Testimony offers the counsel that abstinence is "wise and proper" -- a position that is admitted to fall short of an invariable rule requiring a pledge. This, however, left a residual question: namely, the propriety of retaining an abstinence requirement for elders and deacons. It is this that has been challenged in the ordination of a number of men by Sessions that have argued this requirement to be both unscriptural and unconstitutional.

We send this out with the prayer that it will clarify the issues and contribute to a scriptural and pastoral resolution of a matter that has agitated the RPCNA for too long.

Gordon J. Keddie,
State College, PA
June 30, 1993

Response

The goal of the Special Committee is to arrive at a solution which will bring 'unity, direction and joy.' (SD650:20) We are in hearty agreement with this goal, but would insist that every measure adopted to it's attainment be on the basis of truth, according to the regulative principle of Scripture -- the *sola Scriptura* principle. We say this because we are persuaded -- and will show -- that the Committee's proposed solution is not consistent with this fundamental imperative at every point. [Note: references to Synod's Docket, page and line are as: SD653:26.]

I. We agree that Ordination Query #8 must be changed.

A. We note with thankfulness to God that the Committee declares that:

1. A change in the vow is '**absolutely essential**' (SD653:26),
2. The denomination '**was in error**' in denying ratification of overtures that would have removed the abstinence requirement from Query #8 (SD654:21),
3. The vow is '**beyond the clear requirement of the Scripture**' (SD654:26),
4. Past '**Synod reports . . . adequately demonstrate the lack of a clear and overwhelming prohibition of the use of beverage alcohol at all times and places**' (SD654:28-29),
5. The '**Holy Spirit is clear as to the requirement for ordained officers**' in Titus 1 and 1 Timothy 3, and that '**where God has made ordination requirements explicit, we find no justification whatever in requiring more than He requires.**' (SD654:34-35)

B. We note that this accords with *Confession of Faith, 31: 4*, which states; 'All synods or councils . . . 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.' This is further supported by *Testimony, 31:5*, which declares that 'subordinate standards . . . are never to be taken as a substitute for God's Word or as a complete or final exposition of it.' We believe that the Committee's solemn admission of synodic error requires the following actions by the Synod:

1. A solemn confession of sin in this matter of imposing an unscriptural requirement for ordination and a resolution affirming our commitment to God's Word as the only rule of faith and life,
2. A humble recognition that ecclesiastical discipline to uphold an admittedly unscriptural requirement makes the church courts rules of faith and practice (in contradiction of Scripture and our own confessional standards),
3. A withdrawal of those recommendations enjoining that presbyteries discipline those officers who have respectfully disobeyed the unscriptural abstinence requirement for ordination, and,
4. The adoption of the proposed measure which will bring Ordination Query #8 into conformity to Scripture and the subordinate standards.

II. We believe that the presbyteries' actions should be upheld.

Although the Committee argues for a change in Query #8 with unanswerable biblical clarity, it also insists upon the imposition of discipline in the case of those presbyteries and sessions which did not enforce the requirement that is now admitted to be unscriptural. The Committee argues, in essence, that 'the

integrity of our presbyterian order' necessitates censure -- even to the extreme of 'final separation from the persons involved' (SD651:34) -- for opposing for conscience' sake a position the Committee itself declares to have 'no justification whatever' from Scripture. (SD653:20; 654:34) Because the abstinence requirement is in the present Query #8, it must be enforced, even though it is 'beyond the clear requirement of Scripture.' (SD654:26)

We believe this enshrines a fundamental antinomy. It says that there is a higher consideration than 'the clear requirement of Scripture' -- namely, the maintenance of church order, and that even when it is admitted to be wrong! Our contention is that this is unsupportable from Scripture and our confessions, and that the contrary is in fact the proper position -- that church order must bow before the dictates of God's Word.

A. Some subsidiary considerations

1. The Report proceeded on 'the assumption' that the abstinence requirement is 'a part of the "fundamental law"' of the denomination and thus gave no attention to the questions that have been raised over its constitutionality in light of changes to the *Testimony* and the *Book of Church Government* (SD650:32-33) We would note that they rest on the precedence of the declaration of the 1989 Judicial Committee of Synod -- which declaration was itself little more than a naked assertion, without adequate analysis or argumentation. We do not believe this point has been properly addressed (See Appendix 2).

2. The Report's 'Historical Review' omits the facts that are most relevant for the present case. These are:

- (a) 1975 - Synod and/or Pittsburgh Presbytery exercises no discipline in the case of the deacon of the RPC of North Hills deacon, after he had renounced the abstinence requirement of Query #8 through an orderly use of the church courts.
- (b) 1980 - Synod adopts a revised *Testimony* which replaces the former explicit requirement of

total abstinence for all members of the RP Church with the advice that abstinence is 'wise and proper.' (c) 1987 - Synod adopts a revised *Book of Church Government* which excises all references in the book of *Church Government* (1945) to the total abstinence requirement for elders and deacons.

The significance of these is obvious. They demonstrate *decisively* that in the last two decades the RPCNA has become ever *more* persuaded that Scripture does not demand a pledge of total abstinence as a condition of either membership or of office. We *suspect* that the omission of any censure against the deacon at North Hills RPC owed more to an underlying sense that it would be wrong to discipline someone in the interests of an unscriptural rule, than to a simple case of forgetting to maintain the 'law and order' of the church.

3. The Report characterizes the decisions of the two presbyteries as cases of allowing **'the consciences of individuals, of sessions, and even of presbyteries to emerge as superior to the corporate conscience of the highest ruling body of the Church.'** (SD654:11-13) We would note that both presbyteries explicitly appealed to Scripture -- namely the assertion that there were 'no biblical grounds' for the exercise of legitimate ecclesiastical discipline. At no point has anyone appealed to anyone's conscience as 'superior' to anyone else's. The appeal has been consistently to the actual teaching of the Word of God.

4. The Committee consistently describes the actions of the Grace session and others as disorderly and defiant. It is, they say, **'in defiance of orderliness and orderly change'** and tolerating it will **'allow chaos.'** (SD653:21-23) **'No presbytery . . . has a right to permit such defiance.'** (SD65:16) It is **'disorderly'** for the presbyteries not to enforce the (admittedly unscriptural) abstinence clause. (SD655:42) This, in our judgment, is harsh language that is not justified by the facts. Grace RPC session recognized from the beginning that its actions were *irregular* -- mirroring the inconsistency and irregularity with which the denomination has

dealt with this matter over the years. At no time have we acted in a *disorderly* fashion. Our Minutes faithfully and fully record our actions. These were set before the Presbytery. The Presbytery took up our case and brought it to Synod as its own property. Disorder is the flagrant disregard of scriptural truth and biblical order. In contrast, the fact that these matters have come before Synod as they have is proof positive that there is no disorder or defiance, still less 'chaos.' The Committee should rather be thankful that in spite of decades of controversy, there has been remarkable patience and orderliness, not to mention pastoral wisdom in both congregations and their presbyteries, in the handling of such a sensitive matter.

B. The main issue - the limits of church power

The principal problem with the Special Report, in our view, resides in its reasons for proposing that the abstinence requirement be enforced, upon pain of **'judicial proceedings against any session refusing to abide by Synod's directive.'** (SD658:13-14), while at the same time admitting it to be scripturally unwarranted and insisting that change is **'absolutely essential.'** (SD653:26)

This enshrines a massive *non sequitur*, whatever way you look at it. If discipline is necessary and justified, how can the requirement be wrong? If the requirement is unwarranted, how can discipline ever be justified? The answer is, that, in the Committee's estimation, there is no necessary connection between the two! The case for discipline does not depend *per se* on the scriptural warrant for the measure being enforced, but on the mere existence of that measure as a part of the law and order of the RP Church. In other words, the Report presents two entirely separate, and we will argue essentially contradictory, sets of arguments, although they are intermingled in one body of text. One is about the Scriptural warrant for a particular requirement and the need to change it because it is biblically unwarranted. The other is about the enforcement of a law on the church books because it is there.

1. The two arguments in the Report are as follows:

(a) Argument One: Why discipline is essential

- i. The abstinence requirement is in Query #8 and deemed **'part of the "fundamental law"'** of the denomination. (SD650:32-33)
- ii. We can expect good men to bow to the **'corporate conscience'** of the church, as expressed through **'the understanding and convictions of a majority of the rulers of the Church.'** (SD652:33-34)
- iii. To permit exceptions to something in Query #8 before it is changed by 2/3 votes of Synod and the sessions, would be deleterious to **'the integrity of our presbyterian order.'** (SD653:20)
- iv. Therefore we must require abstinence of our officers and depose them if they will not **'abide by Synod's directive.'** (SD658:13-14)

(b) **Argument Two: Why change is essential**

- i. **'The denomination has failed before God to realize the sanctified intensity of the conscientious convictions of many of its godly leaders,** (SD653:24-25)
- ii. The vow is **'beyond the clear requirement of Scripture'** (SV654:26)
- iii. Past Synod reports **'adequately demonstrate'** this (SV654:28-29)
- iv. Where **'God has made ordination requirements explicit, we find no justification whatever in requiring more than He requires.'** (SV654:34-35)

2. We would offer the following observations:

(a) **The operative assumption here is that the church may require something -- in this case a the practice of total abstinence from alcohol -- which not only is not required by God in his Word, but is even acknowledged by the Synod to be not required by God in his Word! In other words, the RP subordinate standards may require**

a rule of life (if not faith) which God does not require in his Word. This, we believe, is clearly contrary to the *Confession* 31:4 and the *Testimony*, 31:5 and a contravention of the *sola Scriptura* principle.

Anticipating this objection, the Report argues that Synod cannot be charged with **'making no conscientious appeal to Scripture'** when she upholds the requirement that the Report now holds to be unscriptural. (SD653:48) Why? Because Synod appealed to Scripture when asserting that the church had authority to require abstinence **'to prevent offenses and promote mutual edification'** (SV654:4-5)¹ The idea seems to be that as long as Synod appealed to Scripture in the past (however erroneous we may have since discovered this appeal to be), we cannot even now dismiss the abstinence clause as an unscriptural binding of men's consciences! We were requiring what we thought at the time was the teaching of Scripture! But this is surely existentialism, not sound exegesis!

It is also practical relativism. It says that a mistaken understanding of and appeal to Scripture is to be accorded as much respect as a true and accurate understanding of the text, because the church sincerely believed she was being soundly biblical in her handling of the passage at the time. To this we would suggest that the proper response is to repent of past error the moment it is discovered and cease and desist forthwith from enforcing the fruit of that error in the name of the integrity of presbyterian order.

(b) **The Report declares that 'the integrity of our presbyterian order is at stake here.'** (SV653:20) This is

¹ The Report quotes the 1986 Report's quotation of an action of the 1975 Synod. The 1975 Synod Report argued that Scripture could not support a total abstinence requirement, but would suggest that Christians would practice a virtual abstinence. In the debate, the Committee's virtual was changed by motion to total, thereby adopting a conclusion not supported by the argument in the body of the report. Committee members and many others dissented from this blatant irregularity. The point is this: The claim of 1986 that the 1975 Synod appealed to Scripture is only true formally. What was done was to assert that Scripture allowed the church the authority to require abstinence, in the face of the absence of compelling warrant in Scripture for the practice itself. This is a rather clear circumvention of the regulative principle of Scripture, which requires explicit Scripture warrant for everything the church teaches and requires. Again, see Confession of Faith 31:4. Scripture nowhere gives the church the power to make and enforce rules not explicitly warranted in Scripture itself.

supported by reference to the 'lawful authority' to which we are 'to render due submission.' The Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 is given as an example (*Testimony*, 20: 5; SV652:10-11). This sounds very grand, but it overlooks some simple facts.

i. Lawful authority is 'lawful' -- that is, upholds 'law.' Not any law, in the case of the church (or even the state), but God's law. Is total abstinence God's law? No, says the Report, but we must keep it, even to the extent of putting men out of the eldership and the diaconate (and maybe losing them to the church) because it is the church's law. Now ask yourself: which law is coming out as more important here? God's real law, or the church's mistaken law?

ii. The Jerusalem Council had a great debate and in the end decided on enjoining four particular scriptural practices upon the Gentile believers. They came to a remarkable unity. There is no hint of dissent. The reason is obvious -- 'It seemed good to the Holy Spirit.' (Acts 15:28) And the whole church in Jerusalem - apostles, elders and members - appear to have recognized the presence, power and persuasion of the Holy Spirit. Does it seem good to the Holy Spirit to drive men from office for taking exception to a rule the Synod has twice voted to change on account of its conviction that God never required it? We cannot see it. Is it conceivable that the Spirit's leading us into truth could also lead us to discipline men in the interest of an error? This is nonsense!

We would suggest that the integrity of presbyterian order depends on standing for the truth of Scripture alone. No one regards a government as good if it enforces bad laws. And no good government enforces laws it really believes to be bad. The history of civil government is filled with bad laws being ignored until later repealed. If we want our people to respect presbyterian order, we must use it scripturally and justly -- and have the integrity to depart from our past errors in practice, however long it takes to remove the offending words from our standards. They are subordinate to Scripture and need to be kept in their proper place. They are never the rule of faith and life!

(c) The Report speaks of the church having a 'group conscience' - a 'conscience of the body' - to which the conscience of individual members must relate 'in harmony and peace'

(SV652:8,30; 653:1). The Report defines this 'corporate conscience' as 'those decisions that are rendered reflecting the understanding and convictions of a majority of the rulers of the church,' (SV652:33) This determines the law and order of the church and without it there could be no effective oversight of the church (SV652:35,37).

The implication is clear enough. The individual conscience must submit to the 'group conscience.' Two presbyteries erred in allowing 'the consciences of individuals, of sessions and even of presbyteries to emerge as superior to the corporate conscience of the highest ruling body of the Church.' (SV654:11-12) The bottom line is that Synod's decisions are superior to the 'corporate conscience' of presbytery and session and, of course to the conscience of the individual - as long as Scripture has somehow sincerely been appealed to somewhere along the way. The reasoning is: the abstinence requirement is in Query #8 -- it is there as the expression of the 'corporate conscience' of Synod (we know it need to be changed because it is unscriptural, but it has not yet received the right majority [i.e. action of the 'corporate conscience'] to pass it into law) -- therefore we must enforce it and you should never have opposed it as you did, because you are saying you know better (and you are right, but not allowed to be . . . yet). Is 'God alone' the 'Lord of the conscience? Are we 'free from the doctrines and commandments of men? (Otherwise known as rules that go 'beyond the clear requirement of Scripture,' to use the Report's assessment of the Query #8 abstinence clause.) If so, then 'to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience.' (*Confession*, 20: 2)

We would observe the following:

i. 'Group conscience' involves a figurative use of the word 'conscience'. It is not a 'conscience' in the proper meaning of the word.² It is no more than the 'understanding and convictions of

² We would note that the idea of 'group conscience' is not found in our subordinate standards, either in the discussion of lawful oaths and vows or the chapters on the church. It is a literary device that, in our view, obscures the raw fact that all the Report is talking about is majority decisions and laws duly adopted by 66% votes of sessions on overture. The Bible no-

the majority of the rulers.' The implication is that what the majority requires to be believed and/or practiced, must be accepted by the minority as a matter of conscience, even though they (and a number of Synod reports) are persuaded 'the majority' is unscriptural. It is an invitation for dissenters to conform or depart.

ii. But how has 'the majority' voted in the counsels of Reformed Presbyterian Church? Consider the following:

a. Twice - in 1986 and 1990 - Synod has voted by a 2/3 majority to approve a new Query #8 eliminating the total abstinence requirement -- majorities every bit as valid as that which passed Query #8 in 1939 (when it was not sent down for approval on overture).

b. The last overture on Query #8 received a majority both of the sessions and the elders, but only failed to achieve 2/3 of the sessions.

iii. The fact is that a 'majority of the rulers' of the RP church has already voted for change several times in the last six years. The only impediment has been the procedural necessity of a two-thirds majority of the sessions. By the Report's own definition, the so-called 'corporate conscience' of the church has spoken with unmistakable clarity. If the Committee answers that the corporate conscience/majority cannot be recognized until a 2/3 majority of sessions is obtained, we would point out that this in effect turns the 1/3 minority into the effective 'majority' of the church by enabling it to block change and impose discipline on the true majority that has voted repeatedly for scriptural reform.

iv. If the Report really means that Query #8 as approved in the past and presently existing in our 'law and order' represents the 'corporate conscience'/'majority of the rulers,' -- the Report talks about majority decisions and may be thinking of past majorities -- then we would suggest this is no more than making a 'law of the Medes and Persians' out of the subordinate standards of the church.

where speaks of 'corporate conscience,' still less of a hierarchy of superior graded 'corporate consciences' over that of the individual. Scripture speaks of corporate confession of free consciences in response to the Word of God and that is something quite different.

Indeed, the whole point of this controversy is majority dissatisfaction today, over the action of a past generation.

We would point out that church discipline is never to be imposed on the basis of the subordinate standards either primarily or, still less, alone, but on the basis of the Scriptures. The standards serve to systematize our grasp of Scripture truth, so that we more simply identify and conserve biblical orthodoxy in the confessional life of the church. The standards are a trigger to release the pure teaching of the Word. So if the church discovers that the standards contradict the Scriptures or go beyond them in some way in the name of helpfulness, she has no warrant to enforce any unjustified measure. We do not shoot ourselves in the foot if we are serious about taking a step forward. This would seem too obvious to have to mention. It is clear, however, that the Report has failed to grasp that it has made an abstraction of the existing 'law and order' and is proposing to use an admittedly unwarranted position as a whip to punish the very people whose insistence upon the necessity of Scripture warrant has brought the church to face the error it has made. This defies logic. We believe it defies Scripture and our confessions, rightly understood and applied. We therefore believe that Synod should uphold the actions of the two presbyteries and decline to insist on the enforcement of an abstinence requirement in Query #8 that is admitted by the Report to be unwarranted by Scripture.

III. A final thought

The Grace session acted as it did because it was persuaded that God had sent us men who filled every biblical qualification for office -- including the overwhelming recognition and respect of the congregation. If there has been disorder or confusion, it has not been at Grace church. God sent us deacons in answer to our prayers. To refuse office on the ground of a rule we believed to be unbiblical and unconstitutional, in the midst of a period that saw two majority votes for change in Synod and coming on the back of a time in which total abstinence requirements were excised from the *Testimony* and the *Book of Church Government*, did not commend

itself to us as the right way to proceed. In fact, we believed that to do so would have severely impaired the growth and development of the work in State College. We also believe that any enforced reversal of our actions will set the congregation back irreversibly, because we need these men as much today as we did then and we still believe God sent them to us, having equipped them to be officers in his church.

Accordingly, we beg the Synod to reject the disciplinary recommendations of the Special Committee and resolve the 'impasse' in the only biblical way it can be resolved -- namely, by conforming Query #8 to scriptural requirements as proposed and declining to exercise church power in the interest of an unwarranted position.

Appendix 1

Why the State College deacons were granted exceptions to Vow #8

The following piece, explaining the ordination of the two deacons in State College, was adopted by the Session of the New Covenant Reformed Fellowship (now Grace Presbyterian Church [RPCNA]), State College for presentation to the R. P. Synod meeting in Beaver Falls, June 9-16, 1989. It was neverformally presented to Synod, because Alleghenies' Presbytery took up the case in behalf of the New Covenant session.

"Fathers and brethren:

I. Introduction and background

The congregation of New Covenant, State College, PA, has been blessed recently with the addition of two deacons to the Deacon Board - Dr. Donald Streit (ordained and installed, 12/20/87) and Mr. Cyrus Beisel (installed 3/26/89). Both men are eminently qualified to exercise the office of deacon in terms of the Scriptural standards set forth in 1 Timothy 3:8-13 and other Scripture passages relevant to the ministry of mercy. Both were called by the congregation (two-thirds majority), examined and confirmed by the Session and subsequently set apart to the office.

Prior to their separate examinations, however, each man individually initiated a discussion with the Session concerning the phrase in Question #8 dealing with abstinence from alcoholic beverages. While readily affirming the biblical teaching about the sin of drunkenness, neither man could, in good conscience, agree to commit himself to the practice of total abstinence from alcoholic beverages, on the ground that the Lord nowhere in Scripture requires such a commitment or grants the Church power to impose such a pledge upon the Lord's people.

The Session considered the matter very carefully and agreed unanimously to permit the stated conscientious scruples of both men and proceeded to their installation.

II. Reasons for the Session's actions

The reasons for these actions are as follows:

1. The Session knows of no requirement in Scripture that the officers of Christ's church pledge themselves to total abstinence from alcohol.

2. We believe that the Confession of Faith, Catechisms and R.P. Testimony faithfully reflect the teaching of God's Word in that they nowhere affirm that total abstinence is a qualification for the offices of elder and deacon in the Church of Jesus Christ. We note that the Testimony, as revised in 1980, specifically retreated from the earlier position of the RPCNA requiring total abstinence for membership and did not retain any stated requirement that elders and deacons be pledged to total abstinence or as a qualification for office.

3. **Ordination Question #8**, which asks candidates for office to pledge themselves to total abstinence, therefore does not correspond to any stated position - i.e., a formulated teaching appropriately supported by Scripture - in the subordinate standards of the RPCNA. It rests on nothing but its own existence, i.e., on the mere inclusion of the words 'alcoholic beverages' in Question #8. As a result of the 1980 revision of the Testimony, this phrase was cut adrift from the standards of the denomination. Even though Ordination Questions are adopted for inclusion in the Constitution of the Church, they are not independent statements of the church's doctrine. They merely draw attention to the doctrine taught in the Confession, Catechisms and Testimony, rest wholly upon these teachings already stated in the confessional documents, and are not designed to contain anything unique, i.e., that is not taught in the confessional documents themselves. Their force is entirely derived from what is stated elsewhere in the standards. They are simply the formal questions adopted by the Church to mediate between the positions of the Church as stated in the standards on the one hand, and the confessional commitment of the elders and deacons on the other hand. For such a Question [in this case #8] to include an additional teaching or requirement **found nowhere in the doctrinal standards** can only be regarded as an unsupported and therefore unwarranted imposition. Until and unless there is an explicit statement in the Confession, Catechisms or Testimony, positively requiring and Scripturally supporting this point of doctrine and practice [total abstinence from alcoholic beverages], the inclusion of a total abstinence clause in the Ordination Questions must be regarded as improper.

4. The Session is fully persuaded that Dr. Streit and Mr. Beisel were called and equipped by the Lord for the office of deacon and that it is in the interests of the cause of Christ in State College that their gifts not

be denied to the church. These men both exhibit, item-for-item and line-by-line, the biblical qualifications for the office of deacon in 1 Timothy 3. These are men who manifest the fruit of the Spirit, who live holy and exemplary lives, who are deeply concerned about personal godliness and faithful witness, and who have committed themselves to the congregation in such a way that not only their abilities but their caring attitudes have resulted in their being called to office by the Lord's people. We would note that Dr. Streit is now chairman of the Deacon Board, and Mr. Beisel is now the congregational treasurer and our first office-bearer from the Lewistown group, which we hope to see grow into a new congregation. God sent these men and their families to us, and we need their gifts in the work at State College and Lewistown.

After much soul-searching, the Session members individually and collectively concluded that we could find no biblical basis for withholding ordination/installation from these men. For these reasons, the Session proceeded to ordain/install Dr. Streit and Mr. Beisel. We respectfully request that the Synod permit these actions to stand and to take such steps as may be required to resolve the above stated tension between the doctrinal standards of the Church and the inclusion of the total abstinence clause in Ordination Question #8.

III. Petition

The Session of New Covenant congregation would respectfully petition the Synod to adopt the following recommendations:

1. That Synod bring the content of Question #8 into conformity with the teaching of the Confession of Faith, Catechisms and Testimony of the RPCNA by the deletion of the words 'alcoholic beverages and' from Question #8.

2. That Synod declare that an office-bearer who has been granted by his Session a stated exception to the words 'alcoholic beverages and' in Question #8 be permitted to exercise office pending the final disposition of this matter by Synod.

Respectfully submitted,

The Session of New Covenant congregation, State College,
Gordon J. Keddie, Moderator
Daniel Heinze, Clerk

given by action of the Session this tenth day of May, 1989."

Appendix 2

Vow #8 and the 'law and order' of the church

The following is part of the body of the New Covenant (now Grace) Session's draft response to the findings of the Judicial Committee of the 1989 Synod. This was never acted upon or transmitted to Presbytery or Synod, so it is published here for the first time. It discusses the significance of certain Synod actions in the 1980s relative to the total abstinence requirement.

"1. Ordination queries and the 'law and order' of the church

JCS [Judicial Committee of Synod, 1989] asserted that the ordination queries are part of the law and order of the church' and went on to give two supporting arguments.

In response, we would observe that at no time have we disputed that any of the documents contained in the Constitution of the RPCNA are not 'part' of the law and order of the RPC. The Constitution is the 'law and order' of the church in that its various components comprise the *corpus* of doctrine and practice which regulate the conduct of the denomination. Our contention is that not all of these components have either an identical purpose or an equal force -- i.e., that there is a difference between the part of the 'law and order' which states the denomination's doctrinal testimony and those parts of the 'law and order' which perform ancillary functions in the life of the denomination.

Specifically, an ordination query is not a doctrinal statement in its own right, with a life of its own, but is in its very nature a formulary designed for one specific task -- to mediate between the confessional teaching of the denomination and the personal commitment of each office-bearer. That is to say, when an ordination query (which is part of the 'law and order' Constitution) contains a provision not expressly stated in the doctrinal standards, then it ought not to be there at all -- until and unless that specific provision/requirement appears in those doctrinal statements which have been adopted to set forth the church's position on the matter. The JCS statement is, as it stands, unexceptionable. It is no more than a truism: i.e., whatever is printed in the Constitution is 'part' of the 'law and order' of the denomination. This, however, does not address the crux of the matter, namely, whether this 'part' is consistent or inconsistent with other parts of the Constitution.

2. Is Query #8 Constitutional?

The second finding of JCS [Judicial Committee of Synod, 1989] does, however, explicitly address the crux of the matter. JCS disposes of Presbytery's assertion that there is a contradiction between the 1981 Ord. Vow Report (recommendations 1:4 and 1:5) and the content of Query #8 as it presently exists, by asserting that the Synod Report of 1986 (*Minutes*, pp. 151-158) declared there to be no violation of the principles of Scripture' in Query #8 containing a requirement not explicitly in the Testimony. The reason given in 1986 (and repeated in 1989) is that the Church has always presented this requirement 'as based upon Scripture' and has been willing to support its interpretation of Scripture by the use of sound exegetical principles.' The substance of the 1986 report's argument will be assessed in a separate paper [never written, GJK], but suffice it to say that JCS merely repeats what the Report baldly asserted, namely, that the Church believed the requirement was 'based on Scripture, when enacted and that the Church is willing to demonstrate that this is supported by sound exegetical principles.

In response, we would ask: Did the 1986 Report set out the actual, current status of the scriptural basis and demonstrate sound exegesis supporting the requirement? The clear answer is that it did not! It merely asserted that the Church historically adopted the requirement in good faith, believing it at the time to be scripturally supportable. But this surely side-steps the heart of the question, because what really needs to be faced is precisely what scriptural basis and sound exegesis supports this requirement -- especially in view of the studied way in which the 1980 Testimony and the 1987 Book of Church Government deleted all the formerly held explicit requirements of total abstinence for both members and office bearers! [Compare *Church Government* (1945) IV, 7 with the present *Directory for Church Government* III. You will look in vain for any mention of total abstinence!]

It is clear that that which justified making these changes in the documents specifically setting forth our doctrinal testimony and our ecclesiastical practice, cannot possibly be compatible with the assertion that there is scriptural justification for retaining the same requirement in an ordination query.

The point is that the test of 1981/1:5 has not actually been applied to the abstinence clause in Query #8. All that has been offered is the bare assertion that the Church historically believed it to be scriptural to make such a requirement at the time in which it was made and that it is therefore proper to make such a requirement even if it never was in the

Confession of Faith and is no longer in the Testimony We would suggest that the *sine qua non* of any justification for the retention of a separate, isolated abstinence requirement in Query #8 must be the actual demonstration of the alleged Scriptural basis [and the soundness of the supporting exegetical principles] and also the specific declaration of that Scriptural basis in the Testimony.

To argue, as do both the 1986 Report and the 1989 JCS, that the Church believed the requirement to be scriptural when adopted, and conclude from this that there is therefore no contradiction of the principle of 1981/ 1:5 (that states that ordination queries should only contain things declared in the Confession and/or the Testimony to be 'clearly taught in the Word of God,' is simply a *non sequitur*. It just does not follow. Indeed, the fact that the constitutional documents have undergone revision in this matter is powerful evidence of the **failure** of the alleged scriptural basis for the former explicit but now removed requirements. This is surely no basis upon which to pronounce the continuing validity and binding obligation of the the abstinence requirement in Query #8 and thus require the **submission**, resignation or even deposing of office-bearers who were scripturally elected and found qualified to serve."

Appendix 3

Why Synod has no authority to require submission to a teaching or a practice not warranted in God's Word

The following is the text of a response to the action of the Smith Falls, Ont, Session - addressed to the pastor, Christian Adjemian - in reversing their earlier stance on the ordination of a deacon who had earlier been granted an exception on the Vow #8 abstinence pledge.

"October 28, 1992

Dear Christian:

I received your letter of Oct. 15 today. I appreciate your courtesy in informing me of your change of heart, but I must say that I am disappointed that you have come to adopt the position as you state it in your letter. I think that far from facilitating a solution it will tend to mire us even more deeply in the confusion that has marked the discussion of Query #8 for all the years I have been in the RPC. The main difficulty attending the abstinence rule, quite apart from its inherently unscriptural character, has been the interposition of a view of church power, which invests an authority in the courts which transcends the lack of a specific scriptural warrant for the doctrine/practice being enforced. My point, to which I shall return, is that **no Synod has the authority to require something not warranted in Scripture and forfeits any right to the allegiance of Christians on that point.** Here we have a situation where Synodic authority and church unity is held in abstraction from the biblical ground for exercising authority and establishing unity. The Confession, XXXI, 3-4, carefully guards this point. Synod decisions, if "consonant to the Word of God, are to be received with reverence and submission," but "all synods or 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."(emphasis mine). This encapsulates a vital limitation on church power - when they err, they are not to be made a rule of faith or practice. Presbyterianism exists to uphold **truth**, not merely to brook no opposition to its corporate decrees, whatever they may be.

Any assessment of the Query #8 debate in our Synod reveals just how much the Synod has lost the capacity to deal properly with the matter - and with it, I'm afraid, something of the credibility of its authority. Synod has over the years

- (1) recognized that total abstinence is not taught in Scripture,
- (2) removed the TA rule from the Testimony and the Book of Church Governement,
- (3) adopted the position that nothing ought to be in Ordination Queries that is not formulated in the doctrinal standards, and,
- (4) twice attempted to bring Query #8 into line with these standards (to fail on overture).

In the meantime, two judicial committees have merely asserted that Query #8 must stand (as if it were a doctrinal standard itself, as opposed to a mediatory statement linking the doctrine of the standards with the commitments of the ordinands) without providing any scriptural reason for doing so. Before 1980, there was no question as to where the RP doctrinal standards stood - every member and office-bearer was explicitly required to be an abstainer. Since 1980 (Testimony Revision), it has been recognized that TA is no longer required of members. The office-bearers, however, have still had Query #8 to answer, but with the question as to the legality of a TA requirement (quite apart from its lack of scriptural warrant) which was nowhere to be found in any other constitutional documents. Only the naked authority of Synod, sans biblical warrant, has kept this requirement in being, at least from the perspective of church law (Many in the church are committed to it, by conviction, of course). My point is that the Synod has erred, certainly against the Word of God, but also arguably against a right view of the content of her own constitutional documents.

So, if someone had come to me at Synod and asked why we were "in defiance of the Synod," I would have replied that we are not "in defiance" at all, but,

- (1) were exercising our duty to offer a respectful disobedience to a court which is itself in contradiction to the Word of God on the issue in question and acting inconsistently with her own constitution and recent deliverances; and,
- (2) that we were striving through the courts to seek a remedy for this unbiblical imposition.

I would have pointed out that we have not taken a "divisive course" as per Query #9, but have acted according to our reading of the Scriptures and the standards. "Defiance" is a heady word, loaded with its

own presuppositional content, especially in a divided context like our Synod. The two presbyteries are not defying Synod, but rightly insisting that more than naked church power is needed to enforce an unscriptural rule. Defiance is when scriptural rules are rejected with contempt, without any demonstrably biblical grounds for doing so. So, in my opinion, your questioner at Synod begged more of a question, than he answered the real situation in the church. I would note also that the Confession, XX, 2, protects this very point. With respect to unscriptural teachings and rules, we are enjoined that "to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience. . . ." The point is that legitimate authority cannot long survive the absence of scriptural warrant for the thing required. Authority is not the same thing as power. The mere existence of a duly constituted court is not enough - there must be scriptural warrant, point by point, for the legitimate exercise of that power. (That was, by the way, the basis of the Covenanters' dismissal of the non-covenanted state - not that it was merely defective to some degree, but that it was illegitimate and not to be recognized because it had no authority for actions directly opposed to Christ. They acknowledged its power, but denied its authority.) No-one has a right to be wrong, and we have no business toeing a line that is wrong, just because a majority of a church court has continued to vote for it and without adequate biblical reasons.

With respect to the "no divisive courses" Query (#9), let me ask what "doctrine" the RPC has "solemnly recognized and adopted" on the qualifications of elders and deacons? Again I say, Query #8 is not a doctrinal statement as such. Where is the scripturally supported argument and formulation in the RP Constitution which could give some credibility to the assertion that requiring TA of office-bearers was the "solemnly recognized and adopted" doctrine of our church? The reason we are in a pickle on this is that no such formulation exists and, furthermore, all the movements of the last two decades has been away from what was once clearly the position of the Testimony, etc..

So, brother, I can only commend these considerations to you and beg you to stand fast for truth on the real issue - which is, has any church any authority from God to require abstinence; and, do we have any authority in any circumstances whatsoever to obey men rather than God?

You cite the "lawlessness" at Carleton and refer to Cornerstones and the Seattle "cross" issue. I was not there, of course, and am not a

witness of any of this, but I will say this: I do not believe they are comparable to the matter of Query #8. Here's why;

1. Cornerstones is an association of private individuals, none ordained as far as I know, who have agitated for a viewpoint that, while inimical to the Scriptures and the position of the church on who should teach and hold office, has not been the subject of Synodic rebuke hitherto. Faith Martin has dealt openly with her Session and the Presbytery of the bounds. If there is a fault it lies with the courts not acting on the known, accepted scriptural doctrine respecting women in office (and, more importantly even, sound biblical hermeneutics). So how does this apply?

2. The Seattle case came in an orderly fashion and was dealt with in the Synod. We might cavil at the decision, but it was surely an exercise of synodic duty in an orderly manner. So how does this apply?

I think they apply only in this sense - that the proper response of church courts to anything that arises that is perceived to be contrary to the truth, is to answer it with the Truth, the whole Truth and nothing but the Truth. When people come, apparently in good conscience, claiming the authority of Scripture for what they have taught or done, then let the courts answer from the Bible and the Confessions. So far this has not happened in the Query #8 case. There simply must be more of a reason to keep men from office, than a naked assertion in the absence of the slightest scriptural, constitutional and historical analysis, that thus and so is the position of the church and the ruling of Synod and it should be observed anyway!

What is vital at this time in the history of this now 60 year debate, is relief from the bondage of an impossible position. Waiting is not an option after all this time - and, more pointedly, in the practical circumstances of a new work situation like ours. I told our presbytery quite plainly that I felt that the existence of an RP church in State College was at stake. If you insist on unbiblical rules, you reap a practical cost in trying to build a church. I do not argue that we should merely compromise in order to grow. That is not the point. The point is that God raised up good men, by the proper procedure and with all the scriptural qualifications fulfilled, but we say, "Sorry, we can't let you function in our church because you won't take a pledge that God never required in the Word!"

I think that the two presbyteries took the only right path when they declined to exercise discipline on the principle basis that they have no biblical grounds for doing so. That is right. To retreat from it is to interpose other grounds for discipline (church authority) than the warrant

for the particular doctrine in view (biblical warrant for an abstinence requirement). That is not biblical church order, it is tyranny. It says a body of elders have power to exercise discipline on points in which God and the Bible offers no warrant for censure. And that is sin! That is where the repentance ought to happen! It is long overdue in the RP Synod and it will only be further delayed if the two presbyteries and the relevant sessions fall back at this point.

I can only wish that you rescind your position of the Aug 29 memo and insist rather that Synod cease to insist on a practice that God has never required for office in his church.

(signed, Gordon J. Keddie)

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