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THE PRESBYTERIAN  
**PLUMB LINE**

The Presbyterian Plumb Line is an online journal published four times a year and designed to biblically inform the Teaching Elders and Ruling Elders of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church about issues that impact our ability to govern under Christ’s authority and faithfully shepherd the flock.

We strive to provide content that is accessible, firmly rooted in God’s Word, spiritually guided, and committed to the highest standards of truth. Through viewpoint and observation, news items, sermons, book reviews, and other material, we seek to lead our denomination toward a more biblical expression of our Presbyterian conviction: that biblically informed elders, seeking the mind of Christ in the courts of the Church, is the most faithful way to align with God’s plumb line. The editors welcome all inquiries to [info@presbyterianplumbline.org](mailto:info@presbyterianplumbline.org).

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## The Presbyterian Plumb Line

*By David Weber (for the Editorial Board)  
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A plumb line is unwaveringly straight. As such, it is the perfect standard to measure if a structure vertically aligns and rests on a solid foundation. In Amos 7:7-9 the prophet receives the following vision:

*“...behold, the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. And the LORD said to me, “Amos, what do you see?” And I said, “A plumb line.” Then the Lord said, “Behold, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel;” (Amos 7:7–8 ESV)*

The nation of Israel was originally built according to the plumb line, with God’s Word as its solid foundation. However, over time, the people began to drift from this standard, and the Lord’s plumb line revealed their deviation. In verse 9, two main issues emerge: theological error and political abuse. Theologically, false worship was practiced at the ‘high places’ and the idolatrous sanctuaries in Dan and Bethel. Politically, the house of Jeroboam ruled in rebellion against God’s law, rejecting Him as the true king of His people. These two errors fueled each other: as the leadership turned from God as the true King, they led the people into false worship. And as the nation embraced false worship, the leadership strayed further from God’s plumb line. However, this warning is not merely for Israel in the 8th century B.C., but it applies to God’s people throughout history, and we ignore it at our own peril.

The editorial board of this journal believes that Ruling and Teaching Elders in the EPC must continually be measured against the straight edge of God’s Word, lest we drift into false belief and abusive leadership. In our Presbyterian form of governance, we seek to represent the mind of Christ, the only Head of the Church. We are convinced that the mind of Christ is best represented when a biblically informed, spiritually illuminated plurality of elders gathers to discuss, debate, and decide the issues facing the church. However, when elders gather in ignorance, are swayed by worldly wisdom, or when open debate is suppressed, the mind of Christ will not be discerned. If this continues, the people of God under our leadership will inevitably stray into false belief and practice. In the following articles, my fellow editors highlight various ways in which we have observed both subtle and significant deviations from our Presbyterian governance and biblical convictions. These concerns have compelled us to start this publication, with the humble hope of drawing the leadership of the EPC back to the plumb line of Christ, which God has set among His people.

Our task is to produce and distribute an online journal four times a year with articles aimed at biblically informing the Ruling and Teaching Elders of our denomination on issues that impact

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our ability to govern under Christ's authority and faithfully shepherd the flock. We strive to provide content that is accessible to all Elders in the EPC, while being firmly rooted in God's Word, spiritually guided, and committed to the highest standards of truth. Through articles, EPC news items, sermons, and book reviews, we seek to lead our denomination toward a more biblical expression of our Presbyterian conviction — that biblically informed elders, seeking the mind of Christ in the courts of the Church, is the most faithful way to align with God's plumb line.

## **Response to “An Encyclical for the Purpose of Addressing Frequently Asked Questions in the 2024-2025 EPC Church Year”**

Recently, EPC churches have received a letter written by three members of the National Leadership Team (NLT).<sup>1</sup> This so-called “encyclical”<sup>2</sup> seeks to reassure us that all is well and nothing has changed in the EPC. In reality, this letter does exactly the opposite: it demonstrates the alarming change that has taken place in the leadership and direction of our denomination. Although it is intended to inform, this letter raises far more questions than it answers. Out of deep love and concern for the EPC, we offer the following response to the issues raised in this letter.

### **Length of the letter**

The length of this letter is extraordinary, running 14 pages. It is, by far, the longest letter ever written to EPC Presbyters for the purpose of answering questions and concerns. If it takes 14 pages to address these issues, it surely points to a crisis in the EPC. Never before in our 43-year history has such a letter been necessary.

### **Use of “CEO and President” as a title**

Since taking office three years ago, our Stated Clerk, Dean Weaver, has assumed the title of “President and CEO” of the EPC. Defending the use of this title, the authors of the encyclical claim it was a practical necessity for communicating with those outside the church who don’t understand the title of stated clerk. And yet, for 39 months neither the NLT nor the Stated Clerk found it necessary to inform the EPC about this major change. In our 43-year history, no stated clerk has found it necessary to claim the title of CEO. If the pastor of a local congregation claimed the title of CEO, the congregation would surely protest. There is only one head of the church and that is Jesus Christ (Ephesians 5:23; Colossians 1:18; 1 Corinthians 11:3; Ephesians 1:22). As teaching and ruling elders, why were we not informed of this major change?

### **Financial Transparency**

The authors claim that the financial reporting to the 44th General Assembly was “almost the same” as the last eight years “with one exception.” And yet, the authors acknowledge there was a deliberate omission of actual giving and expenses in their written FY25 budget presentation. Not only that, but commissioners with basic questions about actual giving and expenses received no answers from the NLT standing committee or on the floor. As a result, commissioners voting on the budget at General Assembly were in the dark, having no knowledge of the fiscal health of the

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church. Even more troubling, the encyclical claims that this financial misinformation was deliberately withheld because the NLT had received numerous questions about the budget in the past and believed that "... leaving those out would simplify things and be less confusing." When important financial information is deliberately withheld from the General Assembly, it does not "simplify things" but creates mistrust and suspicion. This lack of financial transparency and accountability is without precedent in the EPC.

### **Election of the Stated Clerk**

The encyclical claims that the vote to re-elect the Stated Clerk "occurred on Tuesday instead of at the end of the assembly *as we have in the past.*" (italics added for emphasis). When the re-election of the stated clerk was moved, a commissioner asked what the norm has been for past re-elections. In response, platform leadership claimed they did not know what the norm had been. The platform leadership included a Teaching Elder who has held a staff role at General Assembly for more than 30 years and a Teaching Elder who has attended General Assemblies since 2007. How is it possible that they did not know the historic practice on such important business? The encyclical also claims that the Stated Clerk was re-elected by "an overwhelming majority of the 900 commissioners present." What the authors fail to note is that this vote was unprecedented. In the past, re-election of the Stated Clerk has always been unanimous.

### **Sexual Standards for Ordination**

The encyclical claims that there has been no "liberal agenda" to change the EPC's position on sexuality. "No one on the NLT or GA Staff thinks that same-sex behavior is biblically permissible," the authors declare. And yet, this statement completely misses the point. The real issue before us is not whether homosexual behavior is permissible, but whether a person who identifies as homosexual and experiences same-sex attraction is qualified for ordination. If we ordain self-identified homosexual persons to ministry, we are implicitly endorsing an identity shaped by broken desires and impulses, rather than God's creative and redemptive work. Historically, the EPC's stance on sexual ethics has been rooted in a biblical anthropology that defines believers by their union with Christ, not by their unredeemed sexual desires. The fact that we are even studying this issue is a major red flag and a warning that we are drifting toward an unbiblical view of sexual identity. This shift from an objective, biblical identity to one defined by subjective emotion and experience represents a complete redefinition of what it means to be in union with Christ. While it may be technically accurate that the EPC's official position has not changed, nevertheless, the question under consideration represents a potential major shift. We pray for the Ad Interim Committee's deliberations.

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## **The New River Overture**

An overture submitted to the 44th General Assembly by New River Presbytery recommended changing our constitution to prohibit the ordination of those who identify as homosexual, whether they are celibate or not. The encyclical assures us that this overture got a “fair shake” and that the Permanent Judicial Commission followed “proper process,” in killing this overture. In reality, the ruling by the Permanent Judicial Commission was deemed unconstitutional and was overturned by a vote of GA commissioners. In addition, there was political maneuvering behind the scenes to make sure this overture was referred to an interim committee for two years of study and did not come up for a vote. In no way did this overture get a “fair shake.” As a result, New River Presbytery has written a letter of protest to Dean Weaver expressing their grievances and calling for confession, repentance, and reconciliation.

## **Lilly Foundation Grant**

The EPC received an \$888,000 grant from the Lilly Foundation for the purpose of church health and revitalization. Relative to the annual budget of the EPC, this represents a huge infusion of money from an outside organization. This is about one-third of the annual EPC budget. The encyclical reassures us that this money came with no restrictions or “strings attached.” And yet, how do we know this? Will this funding make us beholden or dependent on the Lilly Foundation for future funding? These are valid questions and ought to be decided by the whole church, rather than a few individuals.

## **Top-Down Leadership**

The encyclical seeks to assure us that General Assembly is not acting in a top-down or hierarchical manner. And yet, this letter communicates exactly the opposite. The tone is scolding, patronizing and defensive. Instead of apologizing or accepting blame, there is mostly denial and doubling down. Instead of encouraging free and open debate, the encyclical seeks to silence and shut it down. Those who disagree with the national leadership are accused of “knee-jerk” reactions and spreading “half-truths and outright lies.” The letter bluntly states: “Thus, should you see any online dissent that shares wildly differing accounts to the answers above, you should be skeptical of the intent of the authors.” In other words, anyone who dares to disagree with the authors of this encyclical is suspect and guilty of spreading disinformation. Ironically, the letter discourages dissent outside of official channels while itself communicating outside those channels. The encyclical urges us to trust in the process and take our concerns only to the church courts which seems dismissive, especially after the New River Presbytery overture got sidetracked by the Permanent Judicial Commission. The push to keep disagreements within church courts is difficult to accept at face value, especially when the very path of the overture process was shut down at the recent General Assembly. It is hard to trust in the church courts when you believe they are no longer fair or impartial and that the deck has been stacked against

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you. The message seems clear: the national leadership can communicate as it wishes, while the rest of us should practice restraint. For commissioners who care deeply about the EPC's future, this feels less like a call to unity and more like an attempt to avoid dealing with the real issues. It is an approach that risks dividing us further instead of drawing us together.

### Conclusion

This encyclical is further evidence of top-down leadership that has permeated the EPC: the desire to silence criticism and control the narrative. If the EPC is in turmoil, the blame does not lie with critics but with EPC leadership. Under this leadership, we have been plunged quite suddenly into discord and division. The peace and unity of the church have been recklessly squandered. Instead of focusing on the gospel, we have been distracted by issues of homosexuality, identity politics, woke ideology, hierarchical leadership, pursuit of cultural relevance and a failure to communicate basic financial information with GA commissioners. Instead of keeping Presbyters informed, we have been kept in the dark. Those on the side of the truth do not discourage open, honest debate or attempt to silence criticism. As a result, EPC leadership has lost the trust and confidence of many within the EPC.

We encourage you to share this response with your Session and with other ruling and teaching elders who are concerned about the leadership and direction of the EPC. We also encourage you to submit overtures to your Presbytery to address these issues. Most of all, we encourage you to pray for the EPC, that these serious issues will be addressed and our unity restored.

Your servants in Christ,

Presbyterian Plumb Line Editors

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<sup>1</sup> The letter is available at <https://presbyterianplumbline.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/An-Encyclical-for-theFrequently-Asked-Questions-in-the-2024-2025-EPC-Church-Year.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> The word “encyclical” has a very definite history and meaning. By definition, it refers to a letter written by the Pope to Roman Catholic bishops, often about the church's official opinion on a subject. Although the authors claim that this letter is “informal” and not an authoritative document, nevertheless they describe it as an encyclical. On whose behalf and by what authority was this letter written? Are the authors speaking for themselves, for the National Leadership Team, for the Office of the General Assembly, or on behalf of the entire EPC? Why should their words have any more weight or authority than those of an ordinary teaching or ruling elder?



## Rebranding the EPC

*By Peter Larson  
TE, Midwest Presbytery*

Not far from my home is a church that once had thousands of members. It was a vibrant center of worship and Biblical teaching. Then, they hired a new pastor who decided the church needed rebranding. He ended the traditional worship service. He gutted the church building to give it an industrial look. He eliminated the Sunday school classes. All this was done in the name of growth and attracting young families.

What happened instead was a train wreck. Instead of growth, the congregation was torn by conflict. In a few months, they lost 700 members. Nevertheless, the pastor doubled down on his vision until finally he was forced to resign. Years later, the church has not recovered from this misguided makeover.

Rebranding is a marketing strategy in which a new name, design, or concept is introduced in the effort to create a new identity in the minds of consumers. Usually, rebranding is what you do when the old brand has lost its luster and become a liability.

In recent years, the EPC has experienced a rebranding. The changes have been sudden and sweeping. The overall impression is that the EPC has changed course and is heading in a very different direction. Some of these changes have been contrary to our core values, polity and Biblical principles. As a result, we are experiencing conflict and discord. Some churches have already left the EPC and others will surely follow. The EPC has changed — many of us sense this. In brief, here are some of the ways the EPC has been rebranded:

- 1. Focus on race and diversity:** The Revelation 7:9 report, calling for greater diversity and multiculturalism in our churches, was immediately followed by the Pastoral Letter of Racial Lament and Hope. Major resources were devoted to these initiatives. Without a shred of evidence, we are asked to believe that the EPC is guilty of racism and discrimination. While this appears virtuous, it is really just virtue-signaling. To focus relentlessly on race and diversity is, in fact, anti-Gospel. The Gospel tells us that we are one in Christ, reconciled by his atoning death, that there is no longer any slave or free, Jew or Gentile, male or female (Galatians 3:28). When we focus on race and skin color, we deny the power and truth of the Gospel. Instead of celebrating our unity in Christ, we are focusing on our differences. At General Assembly we heard the words “equity” and “privilege” — terms borrowed directly from Black Lives Matter and its Marxist ideology. At a recent meeting of Midwest Presbytery, someone asked quite seriously if we should throw out the Westminster Confession because it was written by white males. When you fall down the woke rabbit hole, this is where you land. Why are we focusing obsessively

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on race? Who is leading this charge?

- 2. A Shift to Hierarchical Leadership:** Historically, the Presbyterian tradition has emphasized grass-roots leadership, in which decision-making authority rests with elders. This is, of course, the Biblical model of church leadership. In the early church there was no Pope, no CEO, no directives or mandates issued by headquarters. In recent years, the EPC has shifted to a more corporate, hierarchical model of leadership. Major decisions are being made by the GA Stated Clerk and National Leadership Team. At one point, our GA stated clerk claimed the title CEO, a title that does not appear anywhere in our constitution. Rather than serving as an impartial line judge, he has assumed the role of advocate, seeking to influence outcomes and exert his will.
- 3. Weakening Biblical Standards of Sexuality:** Currently, a homosexual pastor, Greg Johnson, is seeking to join the EPC. Although he claims to be celibate, he identifies as gay and has scheduled events at his church that promote and normalize the gay lifestyle. This pastor has already caused tremendous conflict and controversy in his former denomination, the PCA. Now, he is seeking admission to the EPC. In addition, speakers at a General Assembly training workshop advocated the use of preferred personal pronouns in ministering to so-called transgendered persons. They claim that using such pronouns will communicate grace and love. In reality, this is a denial of Biblical truth and biological fact. We cannot, in the name of love, be complicit in a lie. According to scripture, God created us male and female, and gender is binary (Genesis 1:27). Alternative genders of LGBTQ are unbiblical and represent a rebellion against God and his created order.
- 4. Closing the Door to Complementarians:** Historically, the EPC has been open to complementarians and egalitarians. Regarding women's ordination, we have agreed to disagree. Now, this attitude of mutual forbearance seems to be changing. Increasingly, complementarians are feeling pressured and marginalized. When examined for ordination, there is the perception that complementarians are being unfairly challenged and questioned for their Biblical beliefs. At a recent meeting of presbytery moderators, the GA Stated Clerk reportedly said he would do everything in his power to advance the egalitarian view. If this is true, it is contrary to our founding principles.

These changes are not random or coincidental. They are part of an aggressive strategy to rebrand the EPC. In the name of growth and being “missional,” there has been a deliberate effort to transform the EPC into something different. In the process, we have forsaken some of the core principles that have guided the EPC for 43 years. As a result, our peace, unity, and purity have been seriously eroded. Fault lines have emerged and are deepening. Many of us sensed this at General Assembly — the realization that we are becoming a house divided.

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Meanwhile, the EPC is not growing. According to annual reports, the EPC lost 21,127 members between 2018 and 2023, shrinking from 142,185 to 121,058 members, a decline of 15 percent in five years. If it wasn't for new churches joining the denomination, the decline would be even greater. This is not surprising. Every mainline denomination that has embraced a liberal, progressive agenda has experienced a numerical freefall.

I love the EPC and am grateful to be part of this denomination. However, the EPC has changed to the point where it seems foreign to me. It's like the old sci-fi movie, "Invasion of the Body Snatchers," where an alien presence has quietly invaded and taken over. The rebranding is not complete, but it is well underway. At the recent GA meeting, a former moderator said to me privately, "It's too bad that our current moderator is an old white guy from the South. That isn't the image we need." Sadly, it seems we are concerned more with image than we are with the Gospel.

What the EPC needs is not rebranding but reformation. What we need is not a new logo, but a return to our Reformed, Presbyterian faith and practice. Instead of conforming to the world and its false values, we must be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ, who calls guilty sinners to repent and believe. This message may not be attractive to the world, but it is the only message that will save us.

## Is Baptism a Prerequisite for Participating in the Lord's Supper?

*By Andy Schuster  
TE, Central Carolinas Presbytery*

The 2024 General Assembly of the EPC considered a motion to amend the Book of Order to explicitly require baptism for admission to the Lord's Supper. After considerable debate, the motion failed. This decision marked a serious departure from universal church teaching and the Reformed tradition.

The Westminster Confession warns that it is a “great sin to condemn or neglect” baptism (WCF 28.5). Through the sacraments, God offers tangible signs of his favor. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are how God *defines* and *distinguishes* the church. The Reformed faith teaches, “Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, directly instituted by God, to represent Christ and his benefits and to confirm our interest in him: as also, to put a visible difference between those who belong to the Church and the rest of the world; and solemnly commit them to the service of God in Christ, according to his Word” (WCF 27.1).

What is the church? The church is the body of Christ here on earth (Ephesians 4:11-16). The word for church (*ekklesia*) is a compound of two Greek words: “to call” and “out.” A church is the assembly of individuals who have been called out of the world through the gospel, which declares Jesus to be the Son of God and commands all to repent and believe in him.

As heirs of the Reformation, we believe salvation is by faith alone. God's work, rather than our response to it, is the main thing. However, baptism is the outward and necessary sign of our faith. While it may be possible to be saved apart from the sacrament of baptism (e.g., thief on the cross), this is not normative. Nor should it ever be encouraged by the church. One cannot be joined to the visible church without baptism, and one cannot rightly partake in the Lord's Supper without being baptized. Joining precedes full access, a pattern first established in the life of Abraham.

### The Old Testament Paradigm

God first called Abraham out of idolatry to follow him (Genesis 12), and God promised to bless Abraham and make him a blessing through a promised son. God established a covenant — a relationship — with Abraham. Like all covenants, keeping it led to blessing and breaking it led to curses. At one point, Abraham struggled with assurance of God's promises to him, and in Genesis 17 God gave Abraham the sign of circumcision that all the males in Abraham's house were commanded to receive. In fact, circumcision would be required of any who wanted to be part of the Abrahamic blessing. As God said, “Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised

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in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant” (Genesis 17:14). The individual had to receive the sign/mark of the covenant in order to enter it and be eligible for its blessings.

More than 430 years later, God delivered the people of Israel out of the bondage of Egypt. To confirm the Israelites’ identity as God’s special people, he gave them the Passover. Passover required a lamb to be slaughtered for each household, the lamb’s blood had to be applied to the doorposts of the home, and the flesh was to be eaten by all members (Exodus 12). The observance of Passover distinguished the Israelites from the Egyptians — those without blood on their doorposts suffered the judgment of God.

Could anyone who wanted to escape judgment participate in the Passover? No, only those who first joined Israel through circumcision could eat. God told Moses, “If a stranger shall sojourn with you and would keep the Passover to the Lord, let all his males be circumcised. Then he may come near and keep it; he shall be as a native of the land. But no uncircumcised person shall eat of it” (Exodus 12:48). If someone recognized they were outside of the covenant and of God and wanted to join, provision was there to participate — but it started with first receiving circumcision, not Passover. The blessings of God belong exclusively to the people of God. Full access is only for those who join.

### The New Testament Fulfillment

Why do circumcision and the Passover matter for Christians? God’s people in the Old Testament were marked by two signs, and this fact holds true for the church. Yet there is a better fulfillment of these two signs today. Circumcision and the Passover have blossomed into baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

- Baptism, like circumcision, *initiates* someone into the covenant with God and functions as a “sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of the believer’s ingrafting into Christ, of rebirth, of remission of sins, and of the believer’s yielding to God through Jesus Christ to walk in newness of life” (WCF 28.1).
- The Lord’s Supper, like Passover, is *participation* in the covenant with God, as participants “by faith...spiritually receive and feed on Christ crucified and on all the benefits of his death” (WCF 29.7).

Baptism corresponds to birth/adoption into God’s family, and the Lord’s Supper corresponds to eating at the family table. Only those who have *joined* the body of Christ are free to *participate* in the meal. Stated differently, the Lord’s Supper is only for Christians, and anyone who desires to eat at the Lord’s Table must first become a Christian.

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Consider how the Bible defines the word *Christian*. This word only appears three times in the New Testament — Acts 11:26, Acts 26:28, and 1 Peter 4:16. Acts 11:26 says, “And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.” A Christian, therefore, is a disciple. What is a disciple? Jesus said, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20). A Christian is, by definition, a disciple, who has been baptized and is being trained to obey all that Jesus commanded. Biblically speaking, there is no such thing as a non-baptized Christian.

For those who have been baptized into Christ’s body (1 Corinthians 12:13), all the benefits of Christ are available. Jesus taught that unless we abide in him, we can do nothing, and that is why we must remain united to Christ the same way a branch stays connected to the vine (John 15:4-5). The Lord’s Supper is one of the ordinary means by which Christians abide in Jesus. Jesus said, “Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:54). Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 10:16, “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?”

However, when we participate in communion we must do so in a worthy manner. Paul warned, “For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself” (1 Corinthians 11:29). Those who eat at the Lord’s Supper while failing to “discern” bring judgment on themselves, not blessing. What does it mean to “discern” the body? It means, at a minimum, that communion is for those who belong to the body of Christ, the church, and that requires baptism. It is utterly inappropriate (even dangerous!) to claim the benefits of the covenant while remaining outside of it. Full access is only for those who have joined. Non-Christians should not be eating at the Lord’s Table. Instead, they should first become baptized members of the visible body of Christ so that they can eat the Lord’s Supper in a worthy manner.

### **An Elder’s Responsibility**

No doubt some will think of Christians they know who believe baptism is unnecessary. On the floor of the 2024 General Assembly, the concern was raised that those who have different traditions about baptism would be alienated from the Lord’s Table if baptism was upheld as a prerequisite for eating at the Lord’s Supper. How should we respond to this objection?

In Mark 7:9, Jesus rebuked the Pharisees who were offended at his indifference to their traditions, saying, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition!” Jesus did not accommodate traditions that violated the Word of God, he rebuked them.

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Jesus commanded us to baptize and teach disciples. Jesus asked in Luke 6:46, “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you?” Yes, there are people who claim to be Christian and actively ignore or violate his clear command; this is nothing new. However, those who ignore God’s Word should not be catered to. Rather, they should be instructed in the teaching of Scripture.

Furthermore, the Book of Order 18.3.A underscores that it is the session’s responsibility “to oversee the worship of the congregation,” which includes the administration of the sacraments. Elders cannot afford to ignore the vital question of who receives the Lord’s Supper. Rather they must biblically address this matter, ensuring that their practice aligns with the clear teachings of Scripture.

Paul warned Timothy, “Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions” (2 Timothy 4:2-3). Too many ministers are afraid of offending people and think little of offending God. May God raise up ministers who are unashamed of God’s Word and preach and teach with clarity, urging all who desire the fullness of salvation, “to repent and be baptized” (Acts 3:38) so they can eat at the Lord’s Table and receive his blessing.

## Should a Celibate Gay Minister be Received into the EPC?

*By Don Fortson  
TE, Central Carolinas Presbytery*

In the last two years, the EPC has faced the issue of a same-sex attracted ordained minister who left the PCA (fleeing potential discipline) and is now applying for membership in the EPC's Mid-America Presbytery. This minister openly asserts a homosexual orientation that God has “not promised to change”<sup>1</sup> and declares that he is celibate.

The congregation this pastor serves, which is also seeking admission to the EPC, has supported the controversial “Revoice” conferences.<sup>2</sup> The fact that Mid-America Presbytery did not give an unmistakable “no” to these inquiries has been shocking to many. What has brought about this new openness to consider a question that was inconceivable just a few decades ago? A number of factors seem to have influenced a new way of thinking about homosexuality.

### Differing Perspectives

The cultural pressure to accept gay orientation as normal is immense. Across America, the gay Christian movement is exerting tremendous pressure upon evangelical churches to compromise.<sup>3</sup> Progressives are convinced this is a nuanced discussion — that we must have compassion for same-sex attracted believers who may otherwise qualify for church leadership. Others appear to differ with the historic Christian perspective that pastors are to be sanctified examples to the flock who are above reproach (1 Timothy 3:2, 4:12; Titus 1:6,7). Instead, they argue that pastors are to be seen as fellow strugglers, openly sharing their sinful desires/practices; *ergo*, an openly gay pastor would be more effective in outreach to the gay community.

One also hears a new perspective that all “sins are equal in the sight of God.” So why pick on homosexuals? Another influence is the antinomian tendency within evangelicalism that downplays the requirements of God's moral law in the lives of believers, emphasizing God's *forgiving* grace while minimalizing God's *transforming* grace. Allowing celibate homosexuals in leadership positions is therefore viewed as virtuous in this new perspective on homosexuality.

These new perspectives have stirred up significant turmoil in the EPC. The new view considers resistance to ordaining celibate homosexuals as fearful overreaction and judgmentalism. On the other hand, traditionalists believe that recognizing same-sex orientation/identity as legitimate for a believer is in itself unbiblical. Traditionalists would also affirm the higher standard for holiness required of the clergy, contending that ordaining a celibate homosexual to church office is both disobedient to Scripture and ecclesiastical recklessness. In addition, traditionalists would point to



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recent Presbyterian history for evidence of how compromising with the gay Christian movement led to the blessing of homosexual heresy in the mainline church.

### Presbyterian History

The homosexual issue was beginning to get a lot of press in the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (UPCUSA) in the years immediately preceding the 1981 founding of the EPC. In September 1976, the General Assembly of the UPCUSA appointed 19 individuals to serve on a task force to study homosexuality. This committee was the GA's response to two overtures that requested "guidance" and asked for a special committee to address homosexuality. The committee concluded its work in January 1978. In summing up the work of the committee, the Background Paper observed:

*"In discussing the ordination of self-affirming, practicing homosexual persons, the task force has not been able to reach consensus. We have experienced sharp conflict."*

The Majority report, endorsed by 14 committee members, favored allowing presbyteries the freedom to make their own decisions about ordaining homosexuals. The Minority report, written by five committee members, advised not ordaining a "self-affirming, practicing homosexual person."

At its May 1978 meeting, the UPCUSA GA adopted the Minority report which welcomed gays and lesbians into church membership but stated that "self-affirming, practicing homosexuals" were not eligible for ordination to church office. Evangelicals won the vote, but some critical mistakes were made. First, the 1976 study committee's use of "scientific" studies that recognized same-sex attraction as a sexual "orientation." The study committee's Minority report, written by conservatives, naively affirmed homosexual identity, justifying this as a way to reach the homosexual community.<sup>4</sup>

Undoubtedly, the evangelicals writing the Minority report (which advised against ordination for practicing homosexuals) were trying to find some place of unity with the liberal majority. So, they agreed with ordaining a person who identifies as homosexual, but celibate (the second mistake). As the study committee's Background Paper noted, "The task force quickly reached consensus that no biblical, theological, or constitutional bar exists to ordination of those homosexual persons who have accepted and committed themselves to a celibate lifestyle." Evangelicals apparently thought that compromise on homosexual identity and ordaining celibate homosexuals could be a way forward. In hindsight, this was the first misstep toward normalizing homosexuality in the mainline church. It set the trajectory for the mainline celebration of gay ordination and gay marriage. [The EPC would write its own Position Paper on Homosexuality in 1986].

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## Unity in Essentials

When I wrote the history of the EPC, I decided on the title: “Liberty in Non-Essentials.” This title captures the unique ethos of the EPC within the broader family of conservative Presbyterian denominations in America. Upholding the “Liberty in Non-Essentials” principle has been a bedrock principle of the EPC on a number of issues.

The first official EPC logo had inscribed upon it the famous maxim: “In Essentials Unity; In non-Essentials Liberty; In All Things Charity.” While this winsome motto has been easy to affirm in principle, it is quite another thing to flesh it out in the midst of theological differences. It has not been easy, but the EPC in its 43 years has been able to maintain its embrace of “liberty in non-essentials” in three major areas: women’s ordination, understanding the gifts of the Spirit, and the EPC commitment to be both confessional and evangelical.

In the last couple of years, the EPC has been pushed again on this principle with the question of receiving a gay minister into the EPC. Paradoxically, after four decades, the EPC is now facing the same question the old UPCUSA faced in 1976 — should we allow ordained ministers who self-identify as gay but practice celibacy?

A great strength of the EPC has been the charitable spirit we share among one another in our practice of “liberty in non-essentials.” This has made the EPC a rather peaceable household for most of our 43-year history. This is what has attracted churches from both the left and right of us to seek admission into the EPC over the years.

Of course, one’s greatest strength has the potential to become one’s greatest weakness. Vigilance is imperative. Our admirable tendency to maintain unity in the bond of peace has meant for some the unwillingness to fight over anything. This is a potential weakness for us. We can’t compromise on everything. There are boundaries to non-essentials. Some views must be excluded when they don’t square with Scripture and the teaching of our doctrinal standards, the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms.

While it may be popular among evangelicals to assert “all sins are equal in God’s sight,” this is not biblical. Some may even suggest that homosexual sin is no worse than heterosexual sin. This is likewise not biblical.

The consequences of some sins are more severe than others, and some sins incur a greater judgment among men and in the sight of God. Sexual sins are a more heinous category of sin according to Scripture (1 Corinthians 6:18-20). Homosexuality is singled out as humankind’s ultimate rebellion against the creator’s design in nature (Romans 1:24-28). The Westminster Larger Catechism, following Scripture, declared that some sins are more heinous than others, and homosexuality is in a unique category as sin against the “light of nature” (L.C. Q.151 references

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Romans 1:26,27).<sup>5</sup> The heinous nature of unnatural desires would indicate that only heterosexuals would potentially qualify for church office.

## Conclusion

When it comes to essentials of the faith — core Christian doctrine and practice — we must have unity. There are a host of things we can agree to put into the non-essential category, but there are “essentials” that demand unity. The sexual ethic of the Bible is an essential of the faith. Homosexuality has rightly divided all the mainline churches, and now the issue is beginning to bring division to evangelical churches. The EPC must be willing to fight about this issue, with requisite winners and losers. For the vast majority of the EPC, the consistent biblical understanding of homosexuality is clearly an essential of the faith in which there can be no compromise.

Of course, some of our Christian brothers and sisters have ongoing struggles with homosexual desire, just as heterosexual believers may struggle with ungodly sexual desires. All believers battle sinful desires — that is not the question. The question concerns an individual who continually struggles with homosexual desires and views himself as gay. Should a gay person be in a Presbyterian pulpit? According to Scripture and our confessional standards, the EPC must affirm that a celibate same-sex attracted believer should not hold church office.

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<sup>1</sup> See Greg Johnson, *Still Time to Care: What We Can Learn from the Church's Failed Attempt to Cure Homosexuality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021), 144.

<sup>2</sup> See <https://firstthings.com/how-the-side-b-project-failed/>

<sup>3</sup> See <https://firstthings.com/the-plot-to-queer-evangelical-churches/>

<sup>4</sup> *The Church and Homosexuality*, which contained “The Background Paper of the Task Force to Study Homosexuality” and the “Policy Statement and Recommendations” is available online at [www.pcusa.org/site\\_media/media/uploads/\\_resolutions/church-and-homosexuality.pdf](http://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/_resolutions/church-and-homosexuality.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> See L.C. Q. 151.3 in the original version of the *Westminster Larger Catechism* adopted by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1648.

## A Moderator's Meanderings

*By Gordon Miller  
Moderator, 34th General Assembly*

“Meanderings” definition: Rambling or passing from one topic to another.

I hope you find the following collection of articles, quotes, quips, and Scripture to be informative, edifying, and thought-provoking. This information is not as thorough or detailed as the other articles in the Plumb Line. But I hope to stimulate honest and open debate on a variety of topics and challenges facing the church — especially the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. With cultural changes coming at ever-increasing speed, all of us on the Plumb Line Editorial Board desire that believers will stand firm, rooted in Scripture. I pray that you read this content in the spirit intended: love for Christ and for each other.

*Note:* The views and opinions expressed here are mine alone, and do not necessarily represent the views and opinions of the full Editorial Board of the Plumb Line.

### Books You Might Enjoy

*Five Lies of Our Anti-Christian Age* by Rosaria Butterfield. Crossway, 2023.

Bold, courageous, and unafraid — Butterfield calls them as she sees them. Using Scripture, life experience in the gay community, and a good dose of common sense, she sounds the alarm on a woke culture that has infected the church. She focuses on five lies that are being forced on the church:

1. Homosexuality is normal.
2. Being spiritual is kinder than being Biblical.
3. Feminism is good for the world and the Church.
4. Transgenderism is normal.
5. Modesty is an outdated burden that serves male dominance and holds women back.

Butterfield looks out over the church and gives example after example of the harm being done. A truly enjoyable and informative read, even if you disagree with some or all of her points.

“Seemingly overnight, a civil war within Christianity has broken out.” (p. 1)

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*Shepherds for Sale: How Evangelical Leaders Traded the Truth for a Leftist Agenda* by Megan Basham. Broadside Books, 2024.

A New York Times bestseller that follows in the footsteps of Butterfield's book. Again, we see an author willing to point out how the church can sell out to the culture. Basham's emphasis is on the lure of money, power, and influence being exercised by those wishing to move the church left.

See the First Things blog<sup>1</sup> for a favorable review. But as might be expected, those she calls out are none too pleased. For example, see the critique of Basham's book by one of her targets, J.D. Greear of Summit Church in North Carolina.<sup>2</sup>

### Articles of Interest

“How 40 Protestant Denominations Voted in the Last 4 Presidential Elections”

Ryan Burge, [graphsaboutreligion.com](https://www.graphsaboutreligion.com)

October 10, 2024

<https://www.graphsaboutreligion.com/p/how-40-protestant-denominations-voted>

The PCA is clearly more conservative than the EPC, right? Wrong! Burge, a political scientist who loves to crunch numbers, has come up with some rather surprising revelations. In 2020, the PCA voted 64% for Trump, while the EPC voted 73% for Trump. I would have thought those numbers would have been reversed. Highest percentage for Trump was the Assemblies of God at 78%. Lowest was the African Methodist Episcopal at 6%. Be sure to visit the website as it makes for interesting viewing as you compare the different denominations.

Speaking of presidential elections, the 2024 race is over. May I never see another political ad!

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“Is CRU Losing its First Love for Christ?”

Tom Gilson, “The Stream”

April 3, 2024

<https://stream.org/is-cru-abandoning-its-first-love-for-christ/>

Many of you, and/or your kids have worked with Campus Crusade for Christ (now Cru). Thinking “Crusade” might offend people, the organization changed its name to Cru in 2011. We all remember what a powerful evangelistic organization it was. The author of this article, who served many years with Cru, reports how their training now supports “pronoun hospitality.” Gilson reflects on the slow but steady slide into cultural foolishness and away from Biblical truth. Sad.

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See also “Insidious Winsomeness”<sup>3</sup> by S.M. Hutchens in the September/October 2024 edition of “Touchstone” magazine (behind a paywall), and “Cru ends controversial sexuality and gender training”<sup>4</sup> by Mary Jackson in “World” posted October 9, 2024. In reviewing Cru’s struggle to address LGBTQ issues, Jackson wonders if recent changes to training of Cru staff will really be a step back from its former apparent acceptance of Side B teachings.

### Quotes

“We should concern ourselves, both in our prayers and our endeavors, for the rising generation, that religion may be maintained and advanced when we are in our graves.”

—Matthew Henry

(Author’s note: Gray Hairs, what are we leaving those who come behind us?)

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“We cannot use our thoughts and feelings as a standard: only God’s Word is the test.”

—R.J. Rusdoony

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“The year of grace 1654, Monday, 23 November, feast of St. Clement, pope and martyr, and others in the martyrology, Virgil of St. Chrysogonus, martyr, and others. From about half past ten at night until about half past midnight, FIRE.”

—Blaise Pascal

(Author’s note: It is worth the effort to find the rest of Pascal’s statement, which ends with, “joy, joy, joy, tears of joy.” It will knock your socks off!)

### Humor

As Reformed and Presbyterian believers, we have the most to smile about. Go ahead, it won’t hurt!

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Did C.S. Lewis ever think The Abolition of Man would be done surgically?

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Many folks want to serve God, but only as advisors!

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Why is it necessary to be quiet in church? Because a lot of people are sleeping! (I know, I know.)

## Sermons

Rev. Dr. David Weber delivered this message<sup>5</sup> to the Sixth Stated Meeting of the New River Presbytery on May 3, 2024.

Preaching from 2 Corinthians 5:16-21, he emphasized the core of a Reformed identity rooted in being a new creation in Christ. He urged elders to rely on God's power and faithfully proclaim the gospel of reconciliation. The sermon calls the EPC to hold fast to these truths amidst the cultural and theological challenges facing the denomination.

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<sup>1</sup> Apparently the original review is no longer available, but an archive version can be found at <https://s3.amazonaws.com/5mt.jude3pca.org/2024/08/24125058/firstthings.com-How-the-Evangelical-Elite-Failed-Their-Flock.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://jdgreear.com/an-open-response-to-megan-bashams-shepherds-for-sale/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=37-05-054-c>

<sup>4</sup> <https://wng.org/articles/cru-ends-controversial-sexuality-and-gender-training-1728501898>

<sup>5</sup> [https://presbyterianplumbline.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/sermon\\_newriverpresbytery\\_3-may-2024.mp3](https://presbyterianplumbline.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/sermon_newriverpresbytery_3-may-2024.mp3)

## Overture on Homosexuality Sidetracked at General Assembly

If you attended the 44th General Assembly, you are aware of the controversy surrounding an overture from New River Presbytery (NRP). Passed unanimously by the 39 churches of NRP, the overture recommended adding the following language to the Book of Order:

“Men and women who identify as homosexual, even those who identify as homosexual and claim to practice celibacy in that self-identification, are disqualified from holding office in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church.

Instead of coming to the Assembly for a vote, the issue was referred to an Ad Interim Committee for two years of study. This decision was based on a ruling by the Permanent Judicial Commission (PJC). However, when GA commissioners learned that the NRP overture would not be coming up for a vote, there was protest and pushback.

Dr. Jeff Jeremiah, our former Stated Clerk for 15 years, stood to oppose the PJC ruling, claiming they had exceeded their authority and acted in a manner that was unconstitutional. In an extraordinary development, Dr. Jeremiah succeeded in getting the GA to overrule the Moderator, potentially clearing the way for debate on the NRP overture.

A GA floor debate on the overture never happened. In the end, the PJC ruled that the NRP overture was unconstitutional. And yet, the PJC offered no explanation for finding the overture unconstitutional. It has been reported that the PJC decision was not unanimous; a significant minority of the PJC was convinced that the NRP overture was constitutional but the Assembly never knew this fact. While the majority of the PJC may have had good intentions and reasons for their decision, their lack of transparency and the ultimate outcome give the impression that prejudice against the NRP overture was their primary motivation.

The ruling by the PJC declaring the NRP overture unconstitutional led to an agreement between EPC leadership, Mid-America Presbytery and a few leaders of the New River Presbytery who were persuaded to withdraw their overture and join in a new, consolidated overture that directed the formation of a two-year study committee in which both sides would be represented.

The formation of the committee was presented as a wonderful compromise, but it was extremely disappointing for those who came to GA expecting to vote in favor of the NRP overture. For some members of New River Presbytery, formation of the interim committee was simply the best possible option given the level of political maneuvering and prejudice against the overture.

What was clear to many commissioners at General Assembly is that some of our Teaching and Ruling Elders are in favor of allowing homosexual pastors into the EPC. Mid-America



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Presbytery appears to be willing to bring Greg Johnson and Memorial Church into their presbytery. Another motivation for resisting the New River overture may be that we already have same-sex attracted pastors serving in the EPC and there is a desire to protect them.

One obvious way that the EPC, under its current leadership, is acting in a way that reminds one of the heavy-handed tactics of the mainline is the way in which opposing views were shut down at the 44th Assembly. Every attempt to get the NRP overture on the Assembly floor for debate was rejected by the Stated Clerk, Moderator and Parliamentarian. These actions betrayed an intent to stifle the NRP overture even before the GA began. Again, prejudice against the NRP overture by leadership was transparent to many at the Assembly.

All of this raises some disturbing questions: if an overture approved unanimously by one of our Presbyteries can be so easily sidetracked by political maneuvering and strong-arm tactics, what is the point of bringing overtures to General Assembly? If overtures can be so easily derailed, why bother? If the voice of our presbyteries can be so easily squelched, doesn't this violate our Presbyterian values and heritage? If GA commissioners cannot be trusted to debate a serious Biblical, theological, and moral issue, what does this say about the state of our denomination?

For churches that are worried about the direction of the EPC and seeking clarity on this issue, two years is a long time to wait. Some churches may not wait that long before making their exit. In the meantime, we must pray for the study committee with hope that it will produce a strong majority report that will uphold a Biblical, orthodox view of sexuality along with the recommendation for a constitutional amendment making it clear that only heterosexuals may serve as officers in the EPC.

## New River Presbytery Responds to Suppression of Overture

The Leadership Team of New River Presbytery, responding to “the unfair treatment of our overture” at the 44th General Assembly, has written a letter of complaint to EPC Stated Clerk Dean Weaver. Dated August 31, 2024, the letter was subsequently shared by the Stated Clerk with the National Leadership Team. The entire New River Presbytery also is aware of the contents of the letter. Since it is now public, we would like to share it with the wider family of the EPC because it addresses the troublesome issues observed by many who attended the 44th General Assembly in Memphis this past June.

The stated purpose of the letter is “out of concern for our denomination, respect for the Office of the Stated Clerk, and in hope of achieving reconciliation, peace and healing promised by Jesus Christ to His disciples.” The letter’s chief complaint centers around the unconstitutional and concerted effort to keep the New River overture from debate on the floor of the Assembly, an overture unanimously adopted by an EPC presbytery. New River asserts that the suppression of their overture was for the “express purpose of admitting or protecting sexual dissidents into the ministerial corps of the EPC.”

The New River letter describes the distrust and division resulting from the 44th General Assembly:

“Suppression of dissent and violations of the Constitution, the abuse of Robert’s Rules, and inconsistency of rulings all pointed to a concerted effort to strong arm the Assembly towards a pre-determined outcome at odds with Scripture, the Confession of Faith and the express will of the New River Presbytery. The treatment we received from the platform party has sown distrust and division – a distrust and division that appear to have been carefully and deliberately cultivated. It is apparent from these actions that the peace, unity and purity of the church has been deeply marred – to the point that we are seeking a way of restoration in the Spirit of Christ.”

The letter also makes this observation: “In our experience, our treatment during these past several months has been deeply reminiscent of the way things were typically handled in the PC(U.S.A.).” In response to the letter, the National Leadership Team of the EPC has agreed to meet with representatives from New River Presbytery at the NLT’s January meeting in Orlando.

### Michigan Church Votes to Exit EPC

Concerned by “theological progressive leaning” within the EPC, one of the largest churches in Midwest Presbytery voted in June to leave the denomination. First Presbyterian Church of Trenton, Mich., has since voted to affiliate with the Presbyterian Church in America.

In a statement submitted to the Stated Clerk of Midwest Presbytery, the 500-member church expressed its growing concern with the leadership and direction of the EPC that seems to be pursuing cultural relevance and social justice rather than the Gospel:

“For the last several years FPT has become a more confessionally-minded church,” the statement noted. “Concurrently, FPT has observed the EPC moving in the opposite direction. Moreover, FPT has sensed a change in the presbyterial structure of the EPC, specifically becoming a more top down, leadership driven organization. The latter has made it more difficult to address specific theological concerns. Our differences with the EPC make it more difficult to serve alongside other churches in the Midwest Presbytery, and our continued affiliation weakens our Biblical witness to the world around us.”

Established in 1903, First Presbyterian Trenton was one of the founding churches that formed the EPC 44 years ago. The Rev. Calvin Gray, a teaching elder at FPT, served as the first moderator of the EPC. Despite this long and historic connection, the congregation reached a point where they were no longer in “theological alignment” with the EPC. The departure was amicable and was not contested by Midwest Presbytery.

“In taking this step, we wish to emphasize that our decision is not an indictment against our Presbytery or the EPC,” the statement noted. “We are not seeking to change the EPC or accuse it of any breach of trust. We have valued the decades-long relationship with the EPC and will continue to pray for and with our brothers and sisters in Christ.”

Among the concerns listed in the FPT statement were the growing acceptance of female ordination and the egalitarian view becoming “dominant” in the EPC; the increasing “burden” placed on complementarian candidates for ordination to defend their Biblical convictions; a training workshop at General Assembly that encouraged the use of preferred gender pronouns when ministering to those who identify as LGBTQ; and the “pursuit of cultural relevance by prioritizing social justice over the gospel.” In particular, the FPT statement took issue with an EPC webcast where members of the Rev. 7:9 Task Force advocated use of the “Be the Bridge” curriculum as a framework for understanding racism:

“Rev. 7:9 task force appears to be recommending and using material and resources that strongly parallel and use CRT,” the statement noted. “Two points at issue for us are 1) the pursuit of

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cultural relevance and 2) recommending and using resources which promote Critical Race Theory, which, at its core, is antithetical to the Gospel.”

Teaching Elder Pete Scribner, Clerk of Midwest Presbytery, expressed regret at the departure of the Trenton church. “I was personally saddened to see First Presbyterian of Trenton leave the EPC,” said Scribner. “While I may have disagreed with some of their conclusions, my main frustration was how far down the road to leaving they got before we even knew they had concerns. As I expressed to Aaron, their Session and the congregation as a whole, it felt a little like being married for nearly 40 years and thinking that all is well, only to have your spouse present you with divorce papers without even having previously expressed that they felt there were problems in the marriage.”

Aaron Carr, Senior Pastor of FPT, declined to comment on the church’s decision to leave the EPC.

The complete text of the FPT statement is available at <https://presbyterianplumbline.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/N3-FPCTrenton.pdf>