

Communication to the Great Lakes–Gulf Presbytery  
Spring 2020 Meeting, March 5–7

Dear Fathers and Brothers,

It has been, and continues to be, one of the great joys of my life to have a church home in the RPCNA. After moving through half a dozen denominations in my childhood and early adult years, I took up membership vows among the Covenanters in 1995 and was ordained in this presbytery in 2006. I love my congregation, and I have enjoyed your friendships and the opportunities to co-labor with you in the courts, committees, and fellowship of this church.

It is certainly my intention to continue my labors within this denomination. However, I am saddened by the angst and assertions of contra-confessionalism that have emerged over some of my recent publications.<sup>1</sup> I certainly do not want my scholarly pursuits to become a source of dissension within the church. I have pursued all of my writing projects in good faith and with a clear conscience, believing each of these endeavors to be consistent with my ordination vows. Nevertheless, there are apparently some who think otherwise.

In this letter, I will attempt to distill, what I believe to be, the key points of contention concerning my recent writings in order to invite this court’s oversight. To be more specific, I would like to ask for this court’s guidance whether (as I hope) there remains a place for me to pursue my work within this church. I am committed to the scholarly and pastoral calling that I believe the Lord has placed upon me, but I also respect the importance of pursuing my calling in an ecclesial context where I can be, by God’s grace, a servant of blessing and not a focus of contention.

Toward that end, this letter contains the following four sections:

1. *Narration* — a review of the scholarly and ecclesial processes I have followed in production of the writings now under question, and the events leading to this letter;
2. *On Exceptions* — those points where my recent publications do, and, contrary to some allegations, do not (in my view) involve exceptions to the RP standards;
3. *On the Ordination Queries* — my understanding of the ordination vows as they relate to points of private exception (my writings involve one such exception) to the standards;
4. *Questions* — my questions to this court for your consideration.

Of course, whatever determinations this court may make with respect to this letter, those determinations in no way bind the court from additional action based on different questions

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<sup>1</sup> There are three publications listed in Communication 19-5 from the St. Lawrence Presbytery: Michael LeFebvre, *The Liturgy of Creation: Understanding Calendars in Old Testament Context* (IVP Academic, 2019); “Adam Reigns in Eden: Genesis and the Origins of Kingship” (*Bulletin of Ecclesial Theology* 5.2 [2018], 25-57); and “Cracking the Code of Cadence: The Genre of Genesis” on BioLogos.org (Sept. 26, 2019). In addition to these, other related titles include: “Reading Genesis 1 with the Fourth Commandment: The Creation Week as a Calendar Narrative” in Gerald Hiestand and Todd Wilson, eds., *Creation and Doxology: The Beginning and End of God’s Good World* (IVP Academic, 2018), 7-21; “First Human or First King? The Introduction of Adam in the Eden Narrative” (working title), forthcoming on BioLogos.org; and “The Liturgical Function of Dates in the Pentateuch,” in L. S. Baker, Jr., et al., eds. *Exploring the Composition of the Pentateuch* (Eisenbrauns, forthcoming).

which others may present in the future. However, since clouds of suspicion concerning my work seem to be mounting yet no one is offering this court any concrete allegations to address, it seemed prudent for me to offer some points, myself, that the court might consider.

As always, I am grateful for your prayerful consideration as you watch over the flock of Jesus Christ—including his undershepherds—within this presbytery.

### 1. Narration

My recent publications are best understood within the context of my general sense of calling as both a pastor and an Old Testament scholar, with a special focus on biblical law.

We live in a day when Christians are increasingly uncomfortable with the Old Testament, and especially the Old Testament Law. Take, for example, Andy Stanley’s recent assertion that the time has come for the church to “unhitch the Old Testament” from the Christian faith.<sup>2</sup> Stanley’s words express the lack of appreciation for—and lack of understanding of—the Old Testament, and the Old Testament Law in particular. But for myself, as a pastor who is also an Old Testament scholar, I desire to see the church rediscover her love for the Hebrew Scriptures. And it is my particular sense of calling to contribute toward the church’s love for God’s Law (the Torah).

In 2005, I completed my postgraduate work in the field of biblical law. My dissertation examined the Mosaic law-writings within an ancient Near Eastern legal context (i.e., as “law collections”) in contrast to their later mischaracterization by late Second Temple Judaism under the influence of Hellenistic legal conventions (i.e., as “law codes”).<sup>3</sup> Beginning with that work, my writing has continued to involve significant attention to the Torah (including a special interest in the intersection of the Psalms and the Torah), such as the following:

- “Torah Meditation and the Psalms: The Invitation of Psalm 1.” In Phillip Johnston and David Firth, eds., *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches* (IVP, 2005), 213-25.
- Michael LeFebvre, *Collections, Codes, and Torah: The Re-characterization of Israel’s Written Law* (LHBOTS 451; T&T Clark, 2006).
- “Legal Institutions.” In Brent Strawn, ed., *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Law* (OUP, 2015), 1.536-43.
- “Theology and Economics in the Biblical Year of Jubilee.” *Bulletin of Ecclesial Theology* 2.1 (2015), 31-51. Reprinted in *Reformed Presbyterian Theological Journal* 1.2 (2015), 13-32.
- *Knowing the Bible: Leviticus* (Crossway, 2015).

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<sup>2</sup> Stanley first used that phrase in a sermon series, and he has insisted that many of his critics have taken the phrase out of context. Stanley is not suggesting that the entire Old Testament is without value, only that the Gospel calls us to “unhitch” our lives from the Old Testament laws and other aspects of the Hebrew Scriptures. Stanley has offered a nuanced explanation of his meaning in his latest book: Andy Stanley, *Irresistible: Reclaiming the New that Jesus Unleashed for the World* (Zondervan, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Michael LeFebvre, “Collections, Codes, and Torah: The Re-characterization of Israel’s Written Law” (PhD Diss.; University of Aberdeen, 2005).

- “‘On His Law He Meditates’: What is Psalm 1 Introducing?” *JSOT* 40.4 (2016), 439-50.
- *Knowing the Bible: Numbers* (Crossway, 2018).

I include this list to demonstrate that Torah studies have been a longstanding focus since completing my PhD. In addition to these writing-centered studies, I have also maintained a preaching-centered study of the Torah. Over the past fourteen years, I have gradually preached through the Pentateuch (alternately in morning or evening services), from Genesis through Deuteronomy. In fact, I just finished Deuteronomy a few weeks ago, finally completing this fourteen-year sermon series. It has been extremely fruitful to explore the Torah, from beginning to end, in the context of the church. It was in the course of that preaching series that my attention was drawn to the way dates were being used in the Pentateuchal narratives, prompting the studies into the Torah’s festival calendars that eventually led to these recent writings.

I rehearse the above in order to make the following point: My recent writings on the law of the sabbath (in the Genesis 1:1–2:3 creation-week narrative) and on the law of mediatorial kingship (in the Genesis 2:4–4:26 Eden narrative) are part of my broader sense of calling to pursue research and writing in the Torah. I have no particular interest to stir up creation-evolution controversies, nor have I undertaken these recent writings with that intention. Nevertheless, I am well aware of the controversies associated with those texts, and I am not reticent to address them. However, these recent works were motivated by my broader sense of calling to studies in the Torah, and I feel that sense of vocation keenly. In fact, now that I have recently completed my decade-plus preaching series through the Torah, I am in the early stages of framing my next major writing project on the Torah as a whole.

While this is an area of scholarship that I believe to be part of my personal calling, I have always conducted my studies with sensitivity to my standing before God as answerable for my vows in this church. Synod has exhorted teaching elders to maintain a sensitive conscience before God and, “if they find themselves out of accord with the Confessional Standards of the church,” to self-report their changed “scruples and differences” to their overseeing presbytery.<sup>4</sup> In keeping with that instruction, I want to assure you that I would certainly report to this presbytery if my studies were ever to bring me to convictions inconsistent with my ordination vows. To date, I have not found reason to do so. I am persuaded—as far as I can know my own heart—that my work has been conducted in keeping with my ordination vows. I have drawn this conclusion carefully, and not without deliberate steps to engage oversight from others as well.

Beginning in March of 2018, I gave regular updates to my session and engaged with them in extensive conversations regarding my work.<sup>5</sup> I did so, in part because I expected these materials could be controversial and I did not want my elders unaware. But I also went over early drafts with them, because I wanted their accountability as I reflected on my conclusions and their

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<sup>4</sup> *Minutes of Synod 2003*, 86.

<sup>5</sup> Record of some of these conversations can be found in the Christ Church RP session minutes from 2018 and 2019.

continuity with my ordination vows.<sup>6</sup> Out of an abundance of caution, my elders in turn sought the counsel of several other ministers in the presbytery who further reviewed pre-publication drafts of my work. I also discussed my work and provided early drafts and selections to various other ordained officers throughout the church.

My work may be controversial, but I do not believe it to be contrarian. Because of the volatility of creation issues in our times, virtually any meaningful statement regarding those Genesis texts will unavoidably touch upon controversy; but I do not believe my work contradicts the church's settled doctrine nor my vows as a Reformed Presbyterian minister. Synod exhorts me to do my work with such sensitivity of conscience and to report contradictions when discerned, and I have honored that instruction. I have not come to presbytery to report any "disagreement" because I do not believe my work to be in disagreement with my ordination vows.<sup>7</sup>

As these writings have become public, most of the responses I have received have been extremely heartening.<sup>8</sup> But there have been some disheartening responses as well. Unfortunately, those who have been most vocal in their opposition have made their specific allegations on social media or in other venues not suited for meaningful engagement, and the singular filing placed formally with the church courts (Communication 19-5)<sup>9</sup> offers no specific allegations. The result is a cloud of public suspicion with numerous allegations spreading through social media and word of mouth, but no actual charges to answer in a proper forum that might afford resolution.

Furthermore, under the course of action presently recommended to this court (i.e., the appointment a three-member study committee),<sup>10</sup> it will likely be Fall of 2020 or Spring of 2021 before any concrete findings would be brought into a setting for me to respond and the court to provide direction. In the meantime, allegations of error and public "verdicts" of guilt will continue to spread without opportunity for a hearing and determination by the courts, both to my own discouragement and the increasing confusion of my congregation. The unusual volatility of

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<sup>6</sup> Here is an exact quote from the opening paragraph of one such document that I provided to my elders on August 25, 2018, illustrative of this process: "Some time back, I informed you of recent writing in which I was engaged, wherein I draw conclusions inconsistent with at least one point in our denominational *Testimony*. I do not believe that these exceptions are of such a nature as to violate my vows of ordination; nevertheless, I want to be transparent about these matters. In particular, I believe it important that I submit my own assessment (i.e., that these positions do not violate my ordination vows) for your review and oversight. If, contrary to my assessment, you determine that these writings actually do bring me into conflict with my ordination vows, I would want to follow proper steps for the welfare of the church."

<sup>7</sup> The instruction of synod does not call for elders and ministers to declare every minor (i.e., non-systemic) exception, but specifically those exceptions "on which an officer is ... not in accord with his ordination vow." *Minutes of Synod 2003*, 86.

<sup>8</sup> Many such reviews can be found through Google searches.

<sup>9</sup> Although originally labeled as "Communication 19-4," the clerk of presbytery has informed me that the correct designation for the petition from the St. Lawrence presbytery is "Communication 19-5."

<sup>10</sup> "In response to Communication 19-4 [i.e., 19-5], that Presbytery, meeting at Elkhart Reformed Presbyterian Church, 5-7 March 2020, appoint a three-man Study Committee: (1) to read the Rev. Dr. Michael LeFebvre's book *The Liturgy of Creation: Understanding Calendars in Old Testament Context*, his article "Adam Reigns in Eden," and his Biologos post, "Cracking the Code of Cadence: The Genre of Genesis"; (2) to evaluate the LeFebvre writings and make a judgment as to confessional subscription and hermeneutical legitimacy; and (3) to report the committee's assessment and judgment to Presbytery along with any relevant recommendations." (Recommendation of the Committee to Respond to Communication 19-5; Dec. 19, 2019)

these topics and the highly public nature of serious assertions being made by other church officers against me create a situation in which more timely action by the courts would seem, at least helpful, if not vital.

Therefore, in light of Communication 19-5's absence of specific allegations, the lack of formal processes attached to those venues in which specific allegations are spreading, and the months it will likely take for a committee of presbytery to develop its own findings to consider: I would like to submit to this court several specific points of question myself. The court's answers to my points in this letter in no way preclude the court from appointing a study committee as being proposed by others, nor from dealing with that committee's findings or other charges brought from other quarters, as needed. However, by providing the court with a description of my own thinking with regard to my recent work and its harmony (as I see it) with the church's standards, I want to invite this court's review—and, if need be, correction—of those conclusions I have made regarding my work's propriety within the RPCNA.

## 2. *On Exceptions*

Naturally, I have thought quite a lot about these matters through several years of study. Others may be reading my book and articles for the first time now; but these publications represent years of work, all through which time I have been thinking deeply about my conclusions with sensitivity to the church's standards. In the course of those years of reflection, I have concluded that my views on the Genesis creation texts involve only one point of actual exception to the RP standards. I am aware that there are at least two other points at which some may perceive additional inconsistencies. As for myself, I only recognize one point of exception to a secondary doctrine in the *RP Testimony*, and I believe that I am holding that exception consistently with my ordination vows.<sup>11</sup>

I hope that I am correct in my assessment; but I welcome the instruction of this court on the matter. I will, therefore, rehearse the following three questions of possible exception, and my understanding of each of them, for this body's review:

- a. *RPT* 4.3-4. — on the church's teaching regarding evolution;
- b. *WCF* 4.1 — on the church's teaching regarding the creation days;
- c. *WCF* 6.3, etc. — on the church's teaching regarding our first parents.

By listing these three points, I am focusing on those matters which I recognize to be potential causes of concern. Perhaps there are other allegations of contra-confessional conclusions that others would assert, and I understand that other members of the church are free to bring their own charges to this court at any time. I have written a number of books and articles over the years, so that I am sure there is plenty of material available for review by those who would like to

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<sup>11</sup> On that last point (i.e., how I am handling that exception), see part 3, "Ordination Queries."

offer their critiques. However, the following are three points of doctrine touched on by my most recent writings in ways which others seem to be calling into question.

Note that I am not expecting this court to approve my specific conclusions about the Genesis creation texts. Our standards are designed to provide the boundaries within which various conclusions about some matters may be held. I am not asking this court to approve my specific positions, only to indicate whether I am indeed (as reflected by my own reasoning, below) operating within the bounds of the standards as I hold them.

*a. Evolution — RPT 4.3-4*

3. The theory of evolution which assumes that chance happenings are an explanation of the origin and development of matter and living things is unscriptural. God created various kinds of living forms with tremendous potential for variation. The increase of varieties which has occurred is within genetic limitations provided at creation.

4. *We deny* that man evolved from any lower life form.

These are the positions we hold, as a denomination, with respect to the theory of evolution. I fully affirm the first of these paragraphs (para. 3) and take exception only to the latter (para. 4).

The first (para. 3) renounces that form of evolutionary theory “which assumes that chance happenings are an explanation” for all matter and life. I fully affirm Scripture’s opposition to any view that regards chance as the sufficient explanation of nature’s development,<sup>12</sup> which is what paragraph 3 seems to be specifying. I understand that many in our churches likely believe that *all* forms of evolution are described by this paragraph and would therefore regard paragraph 3 as denying all possibilities of evolution. Some will likely read the phrase “which assumes that chance happenings are an explanation of the origins and development of matter and living things” to be a *definition* characterizing all forms of evolutionary theory. However, the *Testimony* does not appear to require one to read that as a *definition* for all theories of evolution (which, indeed, it is not); rather, the phrase should be read as a *qualification* indicating which specific kinds of evolutionary theory we must deny: namely, any form of evolutionary theory “which assumes that chance happenings” are a sufficient explanation for all that exists.

Note that later in the very same paragraph, we actually affirm that some processes of evolutionary change do occur “within [the] genetic limitations provided [by God] at creation.” Since the very same paragraph acknowledges some forms of evolutionary processes in nature, the earlier statement cannot be read as a blanket characterization of all theories of evolution. It must serve to qualify those particular theories of evolution which are reprehensible: namely, those theories of evolution which deny the active sovereignty of God. Furthermore, the very next chapter of the

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<sup>12</sup> See esp., “Distinguishing Evolution and Idolatry,” *Liturgy of Creation*, 201-3.

*Confession and Testimony* (chap. 5, “Of Providence”) affirms our conviction that there are, indeed, “chance” events that occur in life—but we understand that even “chance” events are superintended by the decree of God. Therefore, it does not appear to me that paragraph 3 requires an opposition to all processes of evolution, but only to those theories which assert evolution as sufficient to account for all that exists (i.e., to the neglect of God).

Rather, I understand this qualification in *RPT* 4.3 as our own participation in the traditional recognition that evolution as a natural process is admissible, but evolution as a pseudo-religious philosophy is not. Thus, for instance, the counsel of A. A. Hodge in one of his 1885 public lectures: “I am going to ask you this afternoon to make the distinction between evolution as a working hypothesis of science and evolution as a philosophy... This doctrine of evolution, when it is confined to science as a working hypothesis, you may let alone, Christian friends, all of you. You need not be afraid of it. It cannot affect any of the questions of religion... On the other hand, what you have been accustomed to call evolution is not a science... Do not fear evolution in the department of science, but do fear and oppose evolution with all your might when it is given to you as a philosophy. As a philosophy it explains everything with one solvent; with one theory it would explain universal being.”<sup>13</sup>

If my understanding of paragraph 3 in this manner is deemed permissible by this court, then I find no reason to assert any exception to it. As far as I can reflect on my own heart, and with a clear conscience toward God, I fully affirm *RPT* 4.3.

It is to paragraph 4 that I find I must take exception. This is the paragraph wherein we, as a church, “deny that man evolved from any lower life form.” For reasons detailed in my paper, “Adam Reigns in Eden,” I do not find that Scripture supports this denial. But neither do I believe that Scripture asserts the contrary. Scripture is silent on such natural processes as evolution, and so I do not think it proper to make a theological statement of faith either affirming or denying evolution. I do, therefore, take exception to *RPT* 4.4.

That being said, I fully appreciate and heartily affirm what I suspect to be the underlying intentions behind that paragraph’s denial. I suspect that the real targets of paragraph 4 are the assertions that are often joined to atheistic claims about human evolution: for instance, that humanity is not in the image of God, or that God did not create humankind. I wholeheartedly deny these conclusions which are sometimes (sloppily) “justified” by recourse to the evidence for human evolution. But I do not believe human evolution, if true, compels those conclusions; and I do not find that Scripture warrants the specific denial made in paragraph 4. That is the only point on which, in my view, my writings represent an actual contradiction to our *Testimony*. Nevertheless, I believe that I have held this exception within the parameters established in our queries (see part 3, “Ordination Queries”).

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<sup>13</sup> A. A. Hodge, “The Original State of Man,” 173-4. In, *Popular Lectures on Theological Themes* (Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1887), 164-90.

If this court disagrees with my assessment that *RPT* 4.4 is a secondary point of doctrine (i.e., that it is not systemic under query four); or, if this court disagrees with my assessment that I have held that exception faithfully in keeping with my ordination vows (i.e., without pursuing a divisive course under query nine): then I would welcome the church’s guidance accordingly.

*b. The Creation Days — RPT 4.1*

1. It pleased God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, for the manifestation of the glory of His eternal power, wisdom, and goodness, in the beginning, to create, or make of nothing, the world, and all things therein whether visible or invisible, in the space of six days; and all very good.

I fully affirm this statement within the parameters expressed by synod in 2002.<sup>14</sup> In that 2002 ruling, synod recognized that the Westminster divines, themselves, almost certainly regarded the six creation days as the actual timing of the creation event. However, synod also recognized “that differing views of the length of these days are held by some in the church” and that these “variant views ... have hitherto not been the ground of either denying ordination or instituting discipline.” Furthermore, synod positively urged, “that the best answer to this situation [i.e., the presence of controversy in the church over the nature of the creation days] is for us to resolve, in the *Confession’s* own language, to let ‘the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture’ be the supreme judge of any controversy in this matter, in the context of ongoing ministry that seeks to be biblically and confessionally faithful before the Lord.”

It is that encouragement by synod that was at the forefront of my thinking when I began this work, and it is *that positive exhortation of synod to pursue study* in these matters that has been a major impetus for me all through the course of this research and writing. My sincere desire has been to participate in that effort (which I had understood *to be encouraged* by the church) and to contribute to the biblical and confessionally faithful examination that synod called for us to undertake “in the context of ongoing ministry.” If I have misunderstood synod’s encouragement in that decision (or if synod, today, no longer encourages such study), at least I have done my work in sincerity and I have not undertaken it with any intentions to be divisive.

Through the course of my work on this subject, I have concluded that the Scriptures do not intend for us to read the creation days as a record of historical chronology. Rather, as I argue in *The Liturgy of Creation*, I am persuaded that the creation week is given to govern the timing for our weekly stewardship and worship without regard for the original creation event’s timing. Thus, I hold to a form of the so-called “framework view” (which is, I think, generally accepted within reformed and presbyterian circles).

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<sup>14</sup> *Minutes of Synod 2002*, 136-9.



In its 2002 action, synod denied the petition of some “to ‘tighten’ our corporate understanding” around an exclusively “literal six-day” view. Instead, synod affirmed that “variant views” on the nature of the days “have hitherto not been ground ... [for] instituting discipline.” Even if that was the case in 2002, I recognize that it is the right of this presbytery to petition synod to now “tighten” our common testimony concerning the creation days and to ask synod to authorize discipline for ministers who take exception to the so-called “literal six-day” view. I welcome the court’s judgment whether my reasoning is deemed to be in keeping with the church’s standards. However, it is my understanding, as far as it is within me to know myself and in my assessment of synod’s past instruction, that my conclusions regarding the creation days are completely consistent with the *Confession* as upheld by our synod.

I might also note, at this point, that several who have been most vocal in opposition to my book are either among the signed dissenters to that 2002 decision by synod,<sup>15</sup> or have expressed their opposition to that decision of synod in private communication. I would therefore ask this court to consider whether some of the opposition against my recent book is actually an opposition to the finding of synod rather than an actual allegation of discord between my own views and those of the church.

*c. Our First Parents — WCF 6.3, etc.*

3. They [i.e., our first parents] being the root of all mankind, the guilt of this sin was imputed, and the same death in sin and corrupted nature conveyed, to all their posterity descending from them by ordinary generation.

My book argues that the creation week (Gen. 1:1–2:3) should be read as a sabbath law; this book has gotten a lot of attention. However, my article on the Adam narrative (Gen. 2:4–4:26)—in which I argue that the account should be read as a kingship law—has received more controversy than the book.

In that article, I argue that the Eden narrative presents Adam as humanity’s first (and failed) universal king in the same manner in which Jesus is humanity’s second (and continuing) universal king. There is, of course, nothing controversial there. But I also note evidence within the Genesis account that suggests the passage is concerned with Adam’s fatherhood as humanity’s federal head without necessitating that Adam be the biological father of all humans as well—such as the presence of contemporaneous populations east of Eden (Gen. 4:14-17) without any effort by the author to explain their relationship to Adam. It is this latter suggestion which, understandably, has raised some eyebrows.

While admittedly controversial, I do not believe these considerations bring me into contradiction with our standards. It is my understanding that phrases like “root of all mankind” and “first

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<sup>15</sup> *Minutes of Synod 2002*, 138.

parents” are used in *WCF* 6.3—and throughout the Westminster Standards—to identify Adam’s federal office, which is precisely what my work affirms. I understand that these terms are generally understood to reflect Adam’s biological fatherhood of all humanity, also. However, that physical link is not the theological burden of these references in the *Confession* and *Catechisms*. In fact, one of the distinctions of the Reformation was the widespread repudiation of Early and Medieval Church ideas about the physiological transmission of sin from Adam. The reformers generally renounced the older notion that sin is transferred from Adam through physical lineage, thereby raising the stature of Adam’s titles as statements of his federal office and removing the sense that physical progeny plays an instrumental role in the transmission of sin. At least, that is my understanding of these facets of our confession of faith.

One of the hallmarks of the Reformation was its organization of theology around its *covenant* structure, including the clarification of humanity’s relationship to Adam and to Christ by virtue of covenants. It is our covenant relationship with Adam that is a necessary facet of our faith. Whether or not all humankind is physically descended from Adam, we no longer hold to that genealogical connection as the mechanism by which original sin is transmitted as was commonly thought in the Early and Medieval Church. Most of the reformers (and most if not all of the Westminster divines) likely did hold that Adam was the biological ancestor of all humankind as well as humanity’s first covenant head. However, the reformers held that original sin is communicated due to Adam’s office, not through the mechanism of physical generation.

Prior to the Reformation, the dominant view in the Western Church was that original sin was transmitted from Adam through physical reproduction. And it was likewise understood that the way to remove the sin nature was through physical baptism. Just as one’s physical birth from Adam was the actual instrument by which sin was imparted (not imputed), physical baptism was regarded as the actual instrument by which Jesus’ regenerative power was imparted (not imputed).<sup>16</sup> One of the particularly testy debates that surrounded these views in the Early to Reformation Church was the debate about *traducianism*. Traducianism asserts that, in order to posit the spread of original sin to all humanity, it is necessary to hold that every human receives, not only his or her physical body from Adam, but that the *soul* is also formed through the reproductive process and descends from Adam generationally.

However, the clear development of a covenant framework for theology in the Reformation period facilitated a general rejection of these mechanistic theories of sin’s transmission and of the human soul’s origin.<sup>17</sup> Instead, the transmission of original sin is due to Adam’s office as our covenant head (under the Covenant of Works). One of the impacts of this theological development was the general rejection of traducianism among the reformed churches in

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<sup>16</sup> Note the discussion in chs. 3-4 (“The Essence and Transmission of Original Sin” and “Infant Baptism and Original Sin”) in Pier Franco Beatrice, *The Transmission of Sin: Augustine and the Pre-Augustinian Sources* (Adam Kamesar, trans.; OUP), 58-91.

<sup>17</sup> Herman Bavinck notes that, in the view of François Elbertus Daubanton (a proponent of traducianism), the “main objection” to the shift away from traducianism “is that it is bound up with the doctrine of the covenant of works, which to him is an ingenious juridical invention.” Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Baker Academic, 2004), 2.581 n49.

preference for *creationism* (a term used, in this context, to posit the view that God creates each human soul new at the point of conception). Louis Berkhof offers this summary: “In the Western Church the theory of Traducianism gradually gained ground... It seemed to fit best with the doctrine of the transmission of sin that was current in those circles [i.e., in the Western Church]... Ever since the days of the Reformation [however,] this [i.e., creationism] has been the common view in Reformed circles.”<sup>18</sup>

At least with respect to the human soul, this development resulted in the widespread repudiation of any necessity for regarding the soul as descending physically from Adam. This development is arguably much more profound than our modern questions about bodily descent from Adam, since it is the soul and not the body that is generally held as the primary locus of the individual’s motivations to sin.

John Calvin was particularly firm on this repudiation of traducianism. In his commentary on Genesis 3:6, Calvin writes, “That we are ... lost and condemned, and subjected to death, is both our hereditary condition, and, at the same time, a just punishment, which God, in the person of Adam, has inflicted on the human race... Nor is it necessary to resort to that ancient figment of certain writers, that souls are derived by descent from our first parents. For the human race has not naturally derived corruption through its descent from Adam; but that result is rather to be traced to the appointment of God...”<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, in his comments on Jesus’ words to Nicodemus in John 3:6, Calvin offers these remarks on the phrase “born of flesh”:

“This [biblical language] led many persons to imagine that not only our bodies, but our souls also, descend to us from our parents; for they thought it absurd that original sin, which has its peculiar habitation in the soul, should be conveyed from one man to all his posterity, unless all our souls proceeded from his soul as their source. And certainly, at first sight, the words of Christ appear to convey the idea, that we are *flesh*, because we are *born of flesh*.

“I answer, so far as relates to the words of Christ, they mean nothing else than that we are all carnal when we are born... for the corruption of all mankind in the person of Adam alone did not proceed from generation, but from the appointment of God, who in one man had adorned us all, and who has in him also deprived us of his gifts. Instead of saying, therefore, that each of us draws vice and corruption from his parents, it would be more correct to say that we are all alike corrupted in Adam alone [i.e., every human’s guilt is received immediately from Adam, not through the mediation of intervening generations], because immediately after his revolt God took away from human nature what He had bestowed upon it.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Eerdmans, 1941), 196-7.

<sup>19</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries* (Baker Books, 2005), 1.1.155-6.

<sup>20</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries* (Baker Books, 2005), 17.2.112-3.

Again, I readily admit that the reformers generally maintained as a historical given that Adam was the first father of the whole human race. However, the doctrine of original sin was explicitly decoupled from physical descent as a mechanistic necessity, even leading to the general rejection of traducianism. Original sin is transmitted to all humankind by imputation due to Adam’s covenantal office (not by impartation through generational descent), just as justification is transmitted by imputation due to Christ’s covenantal office (not by impartation through the sacraments).<sup>21</sup> Herman Bavinck summarizes the matter nicely: “Physical descent alone would have resulted in a situation where the sin we received from Adam would be a deterministic fate, a process of nature, a sickness that had nothing to do with our will and hence did not imply any guilt on our part. That is not what sin is. Nor is the righteousness that Christ as the last Adam confers on us of that nature. Both the *sin* and the *righteousness* presuppose a federal relation between humanity as a whole and its heads.”<sup>22</sup>

As I understand the theology of Adam’s federal headship: it is already woven into the fabric of covenant theology that, while Adam might be regarded as the physical father of the entire human race, neither the universal import of his fall nor the doctrine of original sin and universal human guilt are dependent upon that physiological connection. And if it were to be found that the Scriptures do not present Adam as the sole progenitor of the human race, he would still remain the “first man” and “root of all mankind” by virtue of his covenant appointment—just as Jesus, though never having born children, is called “Everlasting Father” (Isa. 9:6) and the “root of David” (Rev. 5:5)—and the doctrines of the fall and original sin would remain unchanged. It is, therefore, my own sense that my work is completely consistent with this long tradition of orthodox emphasis on the covenantal nature of Adam’s representation. I do not believe that my conclusions about Adam in any way undermine the doctrines about him in the *Confession* and *Catechisms*. But I welcome this court’s review and counsel on these matters.

With respect to that particular confessional phrase, “descending ... by ordinary generation,” the church has already adopted a less restricted reading of its import in recent years. In particular, we do not regard children born through non-ordinary means of generation like in vitro fertilization (IVF) or emerging human cloning technologies, to be free from a sin nature. Both of these reproductive methods are outside the scope of “ordinary generation” as intended by the Westminster divines, yet we do not regard modern non-ordinary means of generation as methods to produce offspring free from original sin.

When the Westminster divines spoke of sin’s spread “to all their [i.e., Adam and Eve’s] posterity descending from them by ordinary generation,” they used that expression to highlight the one exception to humanity’s shared guilt from original sin. Jesus was uniquely free from the stain of original sin, and he was marked as such by his virgin birth. Jesus’ virgin birth was the only known—and at the time of Westminster, the only fathomable—exception to “ordinary generation.” We

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<sup>21</sup> Note the helpful discussion in, R. L. Dabney, *Syllabus and Notes of the Course of Systematic and Polemic Theology taught in Union Theological Seminary, Virginia* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1985), 317-32.

<sup>22</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2.587.

do not hold (as some of the Early Fathers held) that the virgin birth was the instrumental means to produce a holy child. That God chose to use the process of the virgin birth duly marked him out as “conceived by the Holy Spirit,” but the virgin birth was not the mechanism for avoiding transmission of the sin nature. If human cloning successfully produces another child born from a virgin (with no male contribution) as may very well be possible in the near future, we would not regard that child as free from the sin nature due to the absence of male seed in its conception. Such possibilities could never have been envisioned by the Westminster divines. They did not use the phrase “ordinary generation” with that kind of nuance in view, and I think we over-read the *Confession* when we press it for that kind of stricture.

Under the period expectation that “ordinary generation” was the only means of human reproduction apart from the singular virgin birth of Christ, Westminster used that phrase to underscore Jesus’ unique exception from the sin nature. We should not attempt to overburden the phrase with meaning beyond that, and we certainly should not load the phrase with traducian notions of sin’s physical transmission through the conception process. Today, we continue to subscribe to that phrase in the *Confession*, but we do so without supposing that “ordinary generation” is the mechanism that transmits the sin nature. The conventional reproductive language of the *Confession* does not require biological conception to inherit Adam’s sin nature. At least, that is my understanding of this language in the *Confession*.

I recognize that my own views engage with perspectives on the question of Adam’s nature that were probably not considered at the time of Westminster.<sup>23</sup> However, in my assessment, my views do not introduce anything theologically novel nor anything contrary to the Westminster Standards as a system of faith. If I were questioning the historicity of Adam, the reality of the Fall, the validity of original sin or other such doctrines, I would certainly be out of line with the standards. But, as I have come to understand these matters—and as I have searched my own heart before God—I do not believe my conclusions are inconsistent with Westminster as a confession of faith. And I am happy to review these considerations in this letter to you, my fathers and brothers in this presbytery, in order to invite your supervision.

If you disagree with my assessment and conclude that my views are, in fact, out of line with the standards: I want you to know that I have come to these views in good faith and with a sincere conviction regarding their consistency with my ordination vows; but that I will fully respect the determination of this court. I have no desire to cause discord.

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<sup>23</sup> I have not, however, undertaken, nor have I yet come across, any study regarding the ways in which the populations east of Eden were understood among the Westminster divines. Views that Adam was the father only of the Hebrews, and other views regarding a limited scope of Adam’s parentage may have been known at Westminster. However, I accept as likely that the Westminster divines generally regarded Adam as the progenitor of all human beings as well as the first federal head of humankind.

### 3. On the Ordination Queries

There is that one point of direct exception to the church's standards which I earlier owned (*RPT* 4.4). In this next part of my letter, I would like to describe my understanding of the church's ordination queries as they guide us in the identification and handling of exceptions. This is a topic on which there has been a general lack of clarity in our courts. But I have endeavored to formulate my views on the matter in fidelity to the ordination queries and the guidance they outline on these matters. Let me, next, rehearse my sense of the ordination queries as they relate to the standards and to exceptions to those standards, in order to invite your review on this frontier, as well.

Prior to the Reformation, subscription to ecclesiastical standards was a much simpler matter than it has become. One of the fruits of the Reformation was the development of numerous protestant confessions, such as The Thirty-Nine Articles, the Book of Concord, the Three Forms of Unity, the Baptist Confession of 1789, and the *Confession* and *Catechisms* of our own heritage: the Westminster Standards. These new, confessional documents were significantly more verbose than the heritage of creeds which had been the staple instruments of church subscription in previous centuries.

Creeds tend to state bare dogma; confessions tend to include extensive theological instruction underpinning those dogma. According to Carl Trueman, the shift from succinct creeds to more expansive confessions was occasioned by the "institutional fragmentation" of the church. As protestantism separated from Rome, the reformers leaned on confessions for the institutional identity of their emerging ecclesial communions.<sup>24</sup> One could argue that the resulting confessions, having significantly more instructional content than the creeds, proved more pastorally fruitful as catechizing documents than earlier creeds. However, their verbosity has also made ministerial subscription more complicated.

In the era of creeds, ministers were expected to subscribe strictly to every line of the creed. That practice—known as "strict" or "full subscription"—initially continued as the norm in the Church of Scotland after the adoption of the Westminster Standards. For instance, the 1711 form of subscription in the Church of Scotland reads, "Do you sincerely own and believe the whole doctrine contained in the Confession of Faith ... to be founded upon the Word of God; and do you acknowledge the same as the confession of your faith...?"<sup>25</sup> However, such strict subscription proved difficult to maintain.

B. B. Warfield observed, "In a word, a public confession, by virtue of the very fact that it is public, cannot be, and ought not to be pretended to be, just the expression of his faith which each one who accepts it as representing his faith would have framed had he only himself to consider... The

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<sup>24</sup> Carl Trueman, *The Creedal Imperative* (Crossway, 2012), 109.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted from Morton H. Smith, "The Case for Full Subscription," 189. In David W. Hall, ed., *The Practice of Confessional Subscription* (Covenant Foundation, 1997), 185-205.

most we have right to ask is, that each one may be able to recognize it as an expression of the system of truth which he believes. To go beyond this and seek to make each of a large body of signers accept the Confession in all its propositions as the profession of his personal belief, cannot fail to result in serious evils—not least among which are the twin evils that, on the one hand, too strict a subscription overreaches itself and becomes little better than no subscription [i.e., by leading to the hypocrisy of men professing subscription to points they do not really maintain];<sup>26</sup> and, on the other hand, that it begets a spirit of petty, carping criticism which raises objections to forms of a statement that in other circumstances would not appear objectionable.”<sup>27</sup>

Regardless of whether one thinks it prudent to have done so, the fact is that the RPCNA is among those branches of presbyterianism that have moved away from strict subscriptionism. Our queries are formed around “system subscription,” instead. Our fourth query states, “Do you believe in and accept the system of doctrine and the manner of worship set forth in the *Westminster* [Standards]..., and the *Testimony of the Reformed Presbyterian Church*...?”

Charles Hodge explains the meaning of this alternate presbyterian practice of “system subscription,” thus: “We do not expect that our ministers should adopt every proposition contained in our standards. This they are not required to do. But they are required to adopt the system; and that system consists of certain doctrines, no one of which can be omitted without destroying its identity.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, it falls to the church’s imposing court (in our case, synod) to indicate which doctrines within the *Confession* and *Testimony* are essential to the identity of a “Reformed Presbyterian” over against those doctrinal statements which are not essential to Reformed Presbyterian identity. Hodge himself, in the article I just quoted, provides an explicit, doctrine by doctrine list, of those doctrines of the *Confession* which he understood to comprise the inviolable system of doctrine for the church. To date, our synod has not provided such clarity.<sup>29</sup>

The resulting lack of clarity (which is typical of system subscription churches), has been one of the arguments frequently leveled against this approach to confessionalism. When those propositions in a church’s standards deemed systemic are not clearly defined, it can lead to confusion. Morton Smith, who advocated for a return to strict subscription, warned, “System subscription ... maintains that we subscribe to a system of doctrine, which is not specifically defined, but which is contained in the Confession and Catechisms of the Church... The definition

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<sup>26</sup> “Arguably, the stricter the formula of subscription, the more people will be tempted to subscribe ignorantly or deceptively, keeping to themselves the parts of the confession that they don’t understand, or that they doubt.” John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 2010), 287 n5.

<sup>27</sup> B. B. Warfield, “The Presbyterian Churches and the Westminster Confession,” 648. *The Presbyterian Review* 10 (1888), 646-57.

<sup>28</sup> Charles Hodge, “What is the System of Doctrine“ (J. Gresham Machen, ed.). *The Presbyterian Guardian* 2.9 (1936). <http://www.pcahistory.org/documents/subscription/hodge.html>

<sup>29</sup> Recall my efforts over the last several years, in several papers to this presbytery, to ask that the courts would give attention to this need to clarify our system of doctrine. Without such definition, ministers are left to discern what doctrines are systemic (and are thus to be reported to presbytery) and which are not (and are thus to be held with respect to query nine).

of what is included in the system is to be determined by the courts of the Church as occasion arises... Thus we are left to the whim of any particular court of the church in deciding what is and what is not essential...”<sup>30</sup>

Morton Smith was correct in this warning. And it seems to me that we have had too many painful experiences of this uncertainty in our own church courts in recent years, confirming the dangers Smith warned about. When a church lacks a clear definition of its systemic doctrines, “we are left to the whim” of each gathering of the courts, often arriving at inconsistent and unexpected conclusions from year to year, and from presbytery to presbytery. Perhaps my own case will be another example, as I have proceeded with a good faith understanding of my fidelity to the standards but may find my views to be deemed inappropriate by the sense of this or another gathering of the court. Perhaps what was deemed acceptable to synod in 2002 is no longer regarded as acceptable today; or maybe my own sense that *RPT* 4.4 is a secondary, non-systemic doctrine is deemed by the courts to be much more weighty (even though the courts have never indicated *RPT* 4.4 to be a systemic doctrine). There are risks within a system subscription church when we do not have clarity regarding those doctrines which are fundamental to our identity.<sup>31</sup>

Notwithstanding the degree of uncertainty implicit within the term “system of doctrine” when left undefined, the term is certainly not a wide-open door. Even if undefined, the term does identify a certain kind of doctrine within the church’s standards that is deemed essential: namely, those which are systemic to our identity as “Reformed Presbyterians.”

A. A. Hodge, following in the footsteps of his father, further defines the phrase “system of doctrine” in this manner: “It presupposes belief in all those truths which are common to all Christians, and those common to all evangelical Protestants, and embraces in addition all those special doctrines by which the Reformed or Calvinistic Churches are distinguished from ... other Protestants.”<sup>32</sup> In an RP context, with our additional subscription to the “system of doctrine ... set forth in ... the *Testimony of the Reformed Presbyterian Church*,” our vows entail further commitment to those doctrines deemed substantial to our identity as Reformed Presbyterians in distinction from other presbyterians. This still requires discernment and, without clarity from synod, subscribers are left to their own good faith determination and to the “whim” (as Smith put it) of each church court, as we seek to discern which doctrines are systemic to our identity as Reformed Presbyterians. Nevertheless, the term “system of doctrine” does indicate the nature of those doctrines which subscribers are to “believe and accept,” namely those which are substantial to denominational identity.

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<sup>30</sup> Smith, “Full Subscription,” 186.

<sup>31</sup> This circumstance also seems to put us in the awkward position of imposing vows in a manner inconsistent with *RPT* 22.3: “The administrator of an oath, whether civil or ecclesiastical, ought to explain the meaning of the oath... Oaths should be administered only to those who understand their meaning.”

<sup>32</sup> A. A. Hodge, *Life of Charles Hodge D.D. LL.D.: Professor in the Theological Seminary Princeton N.J.* (Charles Scribner, 1880), 407-8.



Ordination query four calls us, as ordained officers of the church, to examine our personal beliefs and convictions to ensure that they are always consistent with whatever is *systemic* to the Reformed Presbyterian standards. What about those doctrines contained in our standards which are secondary?

Secondary doctrines are not without importance nor without force. These additional points of doctrine are still part of the required teaching ministry of every Reformed Presbyterian congregation. Furthermore, ordination query nine includes this mandate regarding both primary and secondary matters: “Do you promise subjection in the Lord to the courts of this church, and engage to follow no divisive courses from the doctrine and order which the church has solemnly recognized and adopted; and do you promise to submit to all the brotherly counsel which your brethren may tender you in the Lord?”

While query four only requires a minister to believe and accept those doctrines which are deemed systemic, query nine prohibits ministers from promoting a “divisive course” with respect to *any* point of doctrine and order in the standards. Thus, even if a minister holds a personal exception to a secondary doctrine, he must guard against pursuing a “divisive course” with respect to that exception. The full content of the standards are the position of the church which ministers are to uphold before their congregations, even though ministers might have personal scruples with various secondary points within them. At least, that is how I have come to understand the nature of Reformed Presbyterian system subscription as expressed in queries four and nine of our ordination forms.

Based on this understanding of my ordination vows, I have concluded that my recent research brings me to take exception to only one assertion in the *RP Testimony*: namely RPT 4.4 (see part 2, “Exceptions”). While the topic of evolution is certainly a volatile one, I have never noted it to be treated as a systemic feature of Reformed Presbyterian faith. It is my good faith assessment that this exception is to a secondary, not systemic, matter. It does not therefore, in my view, require my resignation from the denomination to hold an exception on this point, only my abstention from divisive courses of action regarding it.

On that last point, I have thought long and hard about the prohibition against “engaging in divisive courses” over any point of exception, and particularly whether publishing on the topic would be inherently divisive. In consultation with my session as well as other ministers in the church, I have concluded that it would be prudent to abstain from any teaching on my recent studies within the congregational context to avoid anything that might be regarded as sowing seeds of divisiveness on these matters within the church (and I have, indeed, abstained from any teaching on these topics within the church). However, the ban against “engaging in a divisive course” seems to target certain kinds of actions without imposing an absolute gag order. It therefore seemed fitting to me (again, in consultation with my elders and other ministers of the church) to proceed with the publishing of my work as part of my scholarly vocation, without assuming it to be, automatically, a “divisive course” to do so.

While I have drawn these conclusions in good faith, I recognize that the church courts hold the ultimate responsibility to instruct me if *RPT* 4.4 is of greater weight to the RP system of doctrine than I previously understood (thus putting me in violation of query four); or if my publishing on the topic is, in fact, construed as a “divisive course” either automatically or simply because controversy has in fact ensued (thus putting me in violation of query nine); or if this court believes that I am out of line with other points of the standards besides *RPT* 4.4, and whether those additional exceptions bring me out of line with systemic points of doctrine.

#### 4. Questions

In these pages, I have endeavored to present my understanding with respect to key conclusions in my recent writings and their relationship to the church’s standards. I am not asking this court to review (much less to adopt) my conclusions on the creation accounts, only to assess whether I am operating within the bounds of the church’s standards with respect to the issues arising from those works highlighted in this letter.

Furthermore, while I personally do believe that I am operating within the boundaries provided by our standards, I am not suggesting that my conclusions place me in the center of the theological positions mapped out in the passages discussed. I recognize that some of my conclusions place me on the margins of what the *Confession* allows in some points. Nevertheless, I believe it to be the nature of confessions to map out parameters, within which charitable differences are permitted. And I still find myself within those parameters—at least in my own self-assessment.

However, in light of emerging allegations to the contrary, I seek this court’s oversight of my rationale. Based on the reasoning reflected in this letter:

1. Does this court find that my understanding of *RPT* 4.3, *WCF* 4.1, and the titles of Adam in, for example, *WCF* 6.3, are consistent with my ordination vows?
2. Does this court find that my exception to *RPT* 4.4 is being held consistently with my ordination vows?
3. If this court regards my understanding of any points noted under question 1 (i.e., *RPT* 4.3; *WCF* 4.1; 6.3, etc.) to be inconsistent with the church’s standards, are those exceptions non-systemic and am I holding them consistently with my ordination vows?

These are sincere questions posed for the sake of pursuing the peace of the church—as well as the peace of my own conscience and the peace of my congregation. I hope, by openly discussing my perspectives on these matters, this court can bring some clarity to this controversy.

Gratefully,

Michael LeFebvre

February 6, 2020