

MINUTES OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

III. DECISIONS AND RULINGS

Case No. 2022-21

TE DAVID SENTERS
v.
SAVANNAH RIVER PRESBYTERY

DECISION ON COMPLAINT

October 20, 2023

CASE SUMMARY

This case came to the SJC through a Complaint filed against the Savannah River Presbytery (“SRP”) by TE David Senters, Pastor of New Covenant Presbyterian Church in Richmond Hill, Georgia. The Complaint challenged a portion of Presbytery’s action in examining TE Jonathan Stemberg, who was seeking a transfer into SRP from the Metro Atlanta Presbytery. Specifically, the Complaint challenged Presbytery’s conclusion that TE Stemberg’s stated difference with our Standards concerning the gift of tongues was in fact not a difference. Once denied by a Judicial Commission of Presbytery, TE Senters brought the Complaint to the SJC, a Panel of which heard the Complaint on March 21, 2023.

TE Senters, assisted by TE Dominic Aquila, appeared at the hearing, which was conducted by videoconference. TE Alexander Brown, Pastor of Golden Isles Presbyterian Church in St. Simons Island, Georgia, represented the Respondent, SRP; also representing SRP was TE Kenneth McHeard, Assistant Pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Augusta, Georgia.

Having reviewed the Record and related briefs, and having heard the oral arguments of the Parties, the Panel unanimously concluded the Complaint should be sustained by annulling Presbytery’s action on the stated difference in question and remanding the case to SRP for further action in accord with this Decision.

By a vote of 20-0, the SJC adopted this Decision, as amended, denying the procedural part of the Complaint, and sustaining the confessional part.

I. SUMMARY OF FACTS

- 09/28/21 TE Jonathan Stamberg came before SRP's Candidates and Credentials Committee ("CCC") for examination pursuant to *BCO* 13-6 in anticipation of transferring into SRP. (The only action by the Committee at that meeting in regard to TE Stamberg was to "delay recommending him to SRP until he has time to clarify his views and be reexamined")
- 10/2021 As part of that examination process, TE Stamberg provided a written statement of his "Stated differences with the Westminster Standards." Included in his list of differences was one relating to WCF 21.3, as follows:

WCF 21.3 – “a known tongue.” The WCF helps to guard against abuses of its time when the language of worship was kept out of the vernacular tongue. It can also help to guard against much of the current abuses that take place in the name of the Spirit. But because I desire to not go beyond scripture and say it has more certainty on a topic than it actually does, I would just clarify by saying that I align with that which was adopted by our 2nd General Assembly

- 03/2022 A revised list of differences was presented to CCC before an upcoming reexamination. This list included only two differences. The previous stated difference relating to WCF 21.3 was omitted entirely from this second list.
- 04/12/22 Even though the second list did not include the WCF 21.3 stated difference, the minutes of the CCC, upon its reexamination of TE Stamberg, contain the following excerpt regarding his views and WCF 21.3:

WCF 21.3 “This TE’s views changed so that he said that tongues & prophecy may be present in any age. He had experienced neither. This is essentially my view since I have experienced

MINUTES OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

neither, but I cannot say decisively from scripture that they are not possible.”

At its meeting the Committee again recommended that TE Stemberg “delay coming to the presbytery, to give him time to:

- Read either Tom Schreiner *Spiritual Gifts* or Richard Gaffin *Perspectives on Pentecost*.
- Consider his view in light of *BCO* 7-1.
- Consider his view in regard to the place of his difference with the Standards.”

04/19/22 SRP convened its 74th Stated Meeting. The minutes of that meeting indicate that the CCC expressed its reluctance to bring to Presbytery TE Stemberg’s transfer request in that they wished to “give him time to consider his stated differences with the Westminster Standards.” Notwithstanding that recommendation, a “motion was made and approved to allow the court to hear Mr. Stemberg’s stated difference to WCF 21.3 (Att. E.1-2).” This led to adoption of what became an amended motion: “The court considers Mr. Stemberg’s stated difference with WCF 21.3 as not a difference.”

The stated differences, including the one regarding WCF 21.3, were attached to the minutes as Attachment E.1-2, the relevant portion being set forth below, except for its footnotes:

1 Cor. 14:14 as a proof text for WCF 21.3.

The WCF helps to guard against abuses of its time when the language of worship was kept out of the vernacular tongue. But the supporting verse I Cor. 14:14 seems to be more focused on the spiritual gift rather than translation of scripture into the vernacular (as Latham [sic] says was the original intended meaning of that part of 21.3).

Because I do not desire to go beyond scripture and say it has more certainty on a topic than it actually does, I would just clarify by saying that I align with our denominational fathers in

what they [said] in our 2nd General Assembly
 [Emphasis in original]
<http://www.pcahistory.org/documents/pastoralletter.html>, specifically, paragraph IV.A, namely: 1) how difficult it is to determine with certainty the nature of tongues outside of Acts 2 & the relationship of modern tongues with that mentioned in scripture; 2) that tongues cannot be conceived of as revelatory nor an essential sign of baptism of the Spirit; and 3) should not cause division or diversion from our mission. I would rather avoid the issue altogether because I realize that the probability for being misunderstood is very high, but I will try to address concerns which I can foresee. This may sound like I'm advocating for tongues, further exacerbating any misunderstanding, but I pray not.

- “*Do you speak in tongues or have you spoken in tongues?*” No.
- “*Do you believe ecstatic utterances are of God?*” No.
- “*But there have been many falsified manifestations of the Spirit and even abuses in His name.*” I agree.
- “*Do you believe the canon is closed?*” Yes.
- “*But the sign gifts were only to validate the inscripturation process.*” I definitely see heightened miraculous work of the Spirit in these times. But I am not aware of a strong case that the Spirit’s leadership is limited to those times. So, for example, when testimonies of 100s (conservatively estimated) of Muslim Background Believers (MBBs) describe how their costly journey to Christ began with a dream, I do not have to risk blaspheming the Spirit by saying those dreams have a demonic source. On the other hand, nor do I give scriptural authority to the MBB dream reports; they should be soberly

examined and kept subordinate to scripture. Westminster Theological Seminary faculty [member] Dr. Robert Letham articulates holding tightly to the closed canon while giving room for God to still act as He wills: *“There is no reason—theoretically—why God might not perform miracles at any time. He is able to do so if he chooses (WCF, 5.3). If this were not so, he would not be sovereign. However, the work of Christ is complete, and the canon of Scripture is closed (Heb. 1:1–3). We await the return of Christ and the consummation of salvation. In that context, given their function in the history of redemption, signs and wonders are theologically superfluous. The reality has already definitively happened. God has spoken his final word. There is nothing more he can say. He has said it all. He has left two vivid and effectual signs, baptism and the Lord’s Supper, together with the Word, all pointing to the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of the Father. Miracles may happen; if so, they do not have the same function as they once did.”*

- “*1 Corinthians 13 says that tongues will cease.*” There are three references I see in this passage to that which will cause the ceasing: “the perfect” (vs 10), “face to face” (vs 12), & “know fully, even as I have been fully known.” (vs 12). The first is ambiguous and the latter two are both personal. This personal nature fits most naturally with Christ’s return. It also aligns naturally with Paul’s use of the word face elsewhere to the Corinthians where he is talking about being with Christ (2 Cor 3:18, 4:6).

APPENDIX Q

The examination for transfer was, thereafter, sustained “in all its parts,” and the transfer candidate’s call was approved.

- 06/13/22 The Complaint was filed, directed to the action of SRP in which it stated: “The court considers Mr. Stamberg’s stated difference with WCF 21.3 as not a difference.” However, the Complaint alleged TE Stamberg’s “stated difference was much broader than just with WCF 21.3,” asserting “TE Stamberg’s views in reality represent a stated difference with the WCF 1.1 and 1.6.”
- 07/16/22 At the 75th Stated Meeting of SRP, the Moderator appointed a Commission to consider the Complaint and report at the October Stated Meeting.
- 10/04/22 After prior meetings, the SRP Commission met “to approve the full statement of the case to be presented to the Presbytery.” (ROC 69) The Commission’s Judgment was that: “The SRP did not err in any of the three points of the complaint, and the complaint is denied.”
- 10/17/22 At the 76th Stated Meeting of SRP, TE Brown, as Chairman of the Judicial Commission, rose to present its report, referred to in the SRP minutes as “Att. H. 1-50.” Before he could do so, however, Complainant Senters moved “that the presbytery refer to a study committee the following questions:
- a. Is it appropriate, and perhaps prejudicial, for a member of the ministerial staff of the church from which the case arose to serve as a member of the commission?
 - b. In order to serve the interests of justice, when a case is referred to a commission:
 - (i) Should not the commission be expected to hold a hearing so that the parties in the case can be heard on the matters before the commission?
 - (ii) And further, would not the presbytery be well advised to remand the case to the commission, and in so doing, replace the

MINUTES OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

member who is presently on the ministerial staff of the church from which the case arose?”

The motion related to a study committee failed. The report of the Judicial Commission was thereafter “received” by a vote of 27-2-4. (Although Attachment H is not included in the Record, we understand it to include the Judicial Commission’s Proposed Decision.)

10/20/22 TE Senters carried his Complaint to the General Assembly.

03/21/22 The SJC Panel, consisting of RE Dan Carrell (Chairman), TE Arthur Sartorius (Secretary), RE Sam Duncan, TE Paul Bankson (Alt.), and RE Bruce Terrell (Alt.), heard the Complaint.

II. STATEMENT OF THE ISSUES

1. Did the SRP err procedurally in the manner in which it brought a stated difference of TE Stemberg before the SRP in the course of his transfer exam pursuant to *BCO* 13-6?
2. Did the SRP err by judging TE Stemberg’s stated difference relating to WCF 21.3 on the meaning of tongues as “not a difference?”

III. JUDGMENT

1. No.
2. Yes.

IV. REASONING AND OPINION

The underlying Complaint in this matter presents a significant substantive issue surrounding an instance in which a Teaching Elder of the PCA, seeking transfer from one Presbytery to another, presented the receiving Presbytery with a “stated difference” concerning the gift of tongues. Complainant has also

argued that SRP's procedural process to reach its conclusion of there being "no difference" was in error.

Procedural Issues

Among the procedures about which TE Senters complains are that SRP erred:

- 1) "by acting against the recommendation of its Candidates and Credentials Committee," and
- 2) by failing to follow the provisions of *BCO* 21-4.f and RAO 16-3.e(5), such as in "failing to distribute TE Stemberg's stated difference to the court in his own words."

As to SRP's procedures, the SJC finds there to be no error. Unless the Record reveals a breach of constitutionally required procedures, it remains in the hands of Presbytery to determine how to proceed. There was no such breach in this case.

Presbyteries often assign credential-related examinations, including transfer exams, to established committees such as CCC, and often Presbyteries follow recommendations of those committees, but it is the Presbytery itself that is charged with conducting and acting upon the examinations. (See, e.g., *BCO* 13-6, *BCO* 19-2, and *BCO* 21-4.)

Committees assist as "subordinate instruments" of a larger body like the Presbytery. (RONR (12th ed.) 1:24) The committee thus has an assisting role and is charged to "examine, consider and report" to the Presbytery. (*BCO* 15-1). It is the Presbytery alone, however, that exercises discretion to follow, reject, or even ignore its committee's recommendations.

Similarly, there is no clear error in the manner in which Presbytery had the transfer candidate present his stated difference to the Court. The SRP, when ruling on this Complaint, indicated that Presbytery's "habit" was "to require ministers and ministerial candidates to submit a written statement of their differences with the Confession of Faith and Catechisms," In this case, however, the Court "audibly received TE Stemberg's statement of difference

to 1 Corinthians 14:14 as a proof text for *Westminster Confession of Faith* 21.3” when it was read to the Court by a representative of the CCC. The statement itself “was not included in the Presbytery minutes, as it was ruled to be ‘not a difference’ due to it being a stated difference to a footnote and not to a ‘statement’ or ‘proposition’ in *Westminster Confession of Faith* 21.3 (*BCO* 13-6).” The SJC notes, however, that the stated difference was later included as an attachment to the Presbytery minutes.

At the Panel hearing on this matter, there was some disagreement between the Parties as to whether the oral presentation of TE Stamberg’s difference matched “verbatim” the written attachment to the Presbytery minutes. Respondent indicated that the attachment was essentially read to the Presbytery. Complainant, however, questioned whether that was truly the case. The Record appears supportive of Respondent’s position but accepting that as accurate has no effect on the SJC’s view of the substantive issue addressed below.

One more procedural matter deserves attention. *BCO* 13-6 is unique in how it applies to PCA ministers transferring from one PCA Presbytery to another. For those ministers, the only examination requirement is that the transferees “be examined on Christian experience, and also touching their views in theology, the Sacraments, and church government.” Other examination requirements stated within *BCO* 13-6 do not relate to transfers between PCA Presbyteries, but to transfers of men coming from other denominations. As such, the only transfers covered by *BCO* 13-6 that trigger the more expansive exam outlined in *BCO* 21-4 are those of ministers coming from other denominations, unlike TE Stamberg.

An amendment added in 2011 to *BCO* 13-6 requires “ordained ministers coming from other denominations to state the specific instances in which they may differ with the *Confession of Faith* and *Catechisms* in any of their statements and/or propositions, which differences the court shall judge in accordance with *BCO* 21-4 (see *BCO* 21-4.e,f).” This requirement, however, has never been extended to men transferring between PCA Presbyteries.

Nevertheless, nothing prohibits a Presbytery from imposing that requirement on transferees within the PCA, which would be a wise exercise of a Presbytery’s discretion. That is how SRP chose to proceed with TE Stamberg. Having done so, “Once a difference has been stated, or statements

suggesting a difference exists are made, the Presbytery has an affirmative duty to explore that difference” *Jones v. Louisiana Presbytery* (M36GA, 2008, p. 120.)

The Substantive Issue

As noted above, the SRP, in concluding that TE Stemberg’s stated difference was “not a difference,” observed that the stated difference was “to a footnote and not to a ‘statement’ or ‘proposition’ in *Westminster Confession of Faith* 21.3 (*BCO* 13-6).” Complainant, however, contends that the stated difference in essence is actually a difference from the statements and propositions of WCF 1.1 and 1.6. The SJC agrees. As explained in *Jones*, “A difference does not require overt contradiction or denial.... It occurs whenever a position is asserted that ‘differs’ with the authoritative exposition stated in our Constitutional standards.” *Id.* at 119.

The fact that TE Stemberg first asserted his difference in regard to a footnote and proof text to WCF 21-3 is immaterial as to whether his view is truly a difference. As a result of Presbytery’s inquiries, legitimate questions arose regarding the man’s views on a continuation of the early New Testament spiritual gift of tongues. The Record reveals TE Stemberg’s view as articulated by him is that tongues are spiritual, and a continuing gift ongoing to the present day and beyond.

As pointed out above, at its April 12, 2022, meeting, the CCC recognized that TE Stemberg’s views had “changed so that he said that tongues & prophecy may be present in any age.” The CCC therefore again recommended that TE Stemberg delay coming before the Presbytery. The recommendation was not followed, however, and the matter was taken up by Presbytery at its meeting on April 19. Then, yet another revision to the stated difference was presented by TE Stemberg, who said that 1 Corinthians 14:14 “seems to be focused on the spiritual gift rather than translation of scripture into the vernacular” He later added that he would “try to address concerns which I can foresee.”

What followed – in regard to his addressing of concerns – was a series of bullet point questions and answers that TE Stemberg posed to himself and answered. Answering some questions with a simple “No,” or “Yes,” or “I agree,” the transfer candidate also posed whether “sign gifts were only to

validate the inscripturation process.” To that TE Stemberg questioned whether “the Spirit’s leadership is limited to those times [of the inscripturation process].” He then closed with a final paragraph, which is set forth above in context and repeated below:

“*1 Corinthians 13 says that tongues will cease.*” There are three references I see in this passage to that which will cause the ceasing: “the perfect” (vs 10), “face to face” (vs 12), & “know fully, even as I have been fully known.” (vs 12). The first is ambiguous and the latter two are both personal. This personal nature fits most naturally with Christ’s return. It also aligns naturally with Paul’s use of the word face elsewhere to the Corinthians where he is talking about being with Christ (2 Cor 3:18, 4:6).

In asserting that the timing of ceasing tongues “fits most naturally with Christ’s return,” TE Stemberg appears essentially to be saying that tongues “most naturally” should be understood, in some measure, as continuing through all times including the present. Thus, it would be an error to judge such a view as “not a difference” at all.

As Complainant has argued, such a view differs with portions of the first chapter of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, particularly the first and sixth paragraphs. These paragraphs assert that as God has now provided His revelation in written form, “those former ways of God’s revealing His will unto His people have now ceased” (1.1), and that “the whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.” (1.6)

By concluding that it was error for the SRP to judge TE Stemberg’s view as being “not a difference,” the SJC has not resolved the totality of the matter. The various renditions of TE Stemberg’s differences create some doubt as to his precise view toward tongues. Perhaps with more reflection, he might further modify his view. Perhaps with expanded and more precise articulation, his view could still be deemed as expressing no difference; or as merely semantic; or more than semantic but not out accord with any fundamental of

our system of doctrine. Or it could be that his view is out of accord. In any event, what does appear from the current Record is that it was error to find his view as not stating any difference at all with our Standards.

Conclusion and Amends

For the reasons above stated, the action of Savannah River Presbytery on April 19, 2022, by which the Presbytery considered TE Stamberg's stated difference with WCF 21.3 as not a difference is annulled. We remand the matter to Presbytery to take further action to foster clarification of his view toward tongues and judge that view once clarified. Nothing further can be directed to Presbytery beyond that, as the SJC has before it at this time only the question of whether it was error for SRP not to find a difference.

A proposed decision was drafted by Panel members TE Sartorius and RE Carrell, amended by the Panel, and adopted by a unanimous vote on 5/2/23. The SJC reviewed each part of the proposed decision and approved the amended Decision on the following **20-0** vote, with four absent.

Bankson	<i>Concur</i>	S. Duncan	Absent	Maynard	<i>Concur</i>
Bise	<i>Concur</i>	Eggert	<i>Concur</i>	Neikirk	<i>Concur</i>
Carrell	<i>Concur</i>	Evans	<i>Concur</i>	Pickering	<i>Concur</i>
Coffin	<i>Concur</i>	Garner	Absent	Sartorius	<i>Concur</i>
Dodson	<i>Concur</i>	Greco	<i>Concur</i>	Ross	<i>Concur</i>
Donahoe	<i>Concur</i>	Kooistra	Absent	Waters	<i>Concur</i>
Dowling	<i>Concur</i>	Lee	<i>Concur</i>	White	Absent
M. Duncan	<i>Concur</i>	Lucas	<i>Concur</i>	Wilson	<i>Concur</i>