

Questions for Candidates on the Floor of Presbytery

Introduction

Asking questions of candidates on the floor of Presbytery is an essential aspect of determining both their orthodoxy and pastoral ability. FOG 21.3 states “it is highly reproachful to religion and dangerous to the church to entrust the preaching of the gospel to weak and ignorant men.” Presbytery is to “make trial of his gifts” (FOG 21.4) and must be thorough in this. In light of concerns over how this is done, specifically the practice in which Presbyters ask leading questions or begin to debate with a candidate, the C&C committee brings this recommendation in order to aid Presbytery in examining candidates well.

Overarching Principles

Although the FOG does not speak extensively about how to question candidates, it does state that “explaining and vindicating and practically enforcing the doctrines of Scripture” are essential in an exam. For the candidate this means he must know “**what** he believes”, “**why** he believes it” and “**how** to apply it.” Our questions then would be well suited to address those specific areas rather than entering into debate or pressing a candidate to change.

FOG 21.3 speak to making sure our candidates are well educated. Perhaps in our questions it would be helpful from time to time to seek out the “why”; to seek an apologetic from the candidate regarding specific doctrines. This may make the floor exam longer but since we are called to weigh the man’s theological integrity and ability toward the gospel ministry this is a most important function of Presbytery.

In our questioning we would do well to remember that Presbytery “pastors the pastors.” This is something candidates should see as we ask questions pastorally (rather than loading our questions) for thus we example to them our pastoral heart. We can teach young pastors to be divisive by how we question them, or train them to be pastoral in manner, mind and heart through how we question them. [that doesn’t mean we should not ask hard questions, but *how* we ask is as important as *what* we ask.]

Finally, it would behoove us to examine the motive behind our questions. Are we being reactionary to the candidate or the topic? Does our question reflect the breadth of the Reformed/Christian faith or a fragment of our precious heritage? The rabbit trails may not be necessary in determining whether or not we can be satisfied with the candidate.¹ If things need to be debated, the second part of the exam is meant to entertain that. The first part of the theology exam focuses on questioning the candidate while the second part is the debate phase –it is for this latter phase to which we must “reserve our judgments for the debate on sustaining the exam.”²

¹ “Satisfaction is the language used in FOG 21.5, 7 –satisfaction does not necessarily mean full agreement

² Minutes of C&C meeting June 9, 2005 “By general consent it was decided to request the moderator of Presbytery to remind the commissioners that the period after a theology exam is divided into two sections –

Implementation

Moderator:

- alert Presbyters when they are “pursuing” the candidate
- ask Presbyters to rephrase questions, or take “sharpness/leading” out of them
- determine whether questions are asking candidate to debate or support his position

Presbyters/Questioners:

- seek to lay open position of candidate so that all can see whether or not this man will be a capable, orthodox pastor
- in order to do this ask:
 - the **what**: seek out the position of the candidate on particular subject
 - the **why**: seek out his ability to support his position (Bible, confessions)
 - the **who cares**: what practical bearing does this doctrine have, can the candidate apply it to a situation³
- seek to avoid:
 - trying to win him over to what you believe
 - trying to convince him he is wrong or unorthodox
 - trying to prove a point or make a statement via the candidate
 - trying to persuade Presbytery of your beliefs in question phase

Candidate:

- seek to lay out your views and avoid arguing with Presbyters
- acknowledge there are differences but lay out why you believe what you believe from Scripture and the confessions.

For example:

Poor question:

What does the word day in Genesis mean? If it means 24 hours here, how can it mean something else here?

Helpful question:

What is your position on the historicity of Genesis 1-2?

Followup: Please back your position exegetically and confessionally,

or, how does your view square with subscription?

or, how would you answer the concern/accusation that your position panders to exegetical leniency/crazy-making?

a questioning phase and a debate phase. Commissioners, therefore, should be reminded to refrain from debate during the questioning period and to reserve their judgments for the debate on sustaining the exam.”

³ FOG 21.5 explain, vindicate, practically to enforce the doctrines of the gospel...