

## **Irons Trial: Chronology of Events**

**October 20, 1995** –Mr. Irons registered his exceptions to the Westminster Standards (4-page document) and was licensed by the Presbytery of Southern California of the OPC:

Re. WSC/WLC on the 4th commandment: “I think a candid reading of the text [Exod 20:8-11] shows that the fourth commandment explicitly requires the sanctification of the seventh day – not merely the ratio of one day out of seven ... I do not hold (as the Westminster divines apparently did) that the ten commandments contain no positive or historically-conditioned elements.”

Re. WSC/WLC on the 5th commandment: “I question the Confession’s wooden interpretation of the promise of long life. My hunch is that Israel understood it sacramentally or typologically as a promise of eternal life (at least Paul did, Eph. 6:2-3).”

**February 6, 1998** – Mr. Irons’ ordination exam was sustained. The clerk reminded the Presbytery that Mr. Irons’ document of exceptions was still on file and unchanged.

**March 1, 1998** – Mr. Irons was ordained and installed by the Presbytery to be the organizing pastor of Redeemer Chapel, a mission work of the Presbytery. The Presbytery had set up a subcommittee of the Presbytery to function as the session of Redeemer Chapel, called the Overseeing Session.

**May 10, 2000** – In the course of a Wednesday night Bible Study on the Gospel of Mark, when dealing with Mark 2:23–3:6 (Jesus’ attitude toward the Sabbath), several members of Redeemer Chapel raised questions about Mr. Irons’ view of the Sabbath.

**August 31, 2000** – The Overseeing Session of Redeemer Chapel received a letter from two couples, members of the chapel, requesting the session to examine Mr. Irons’ views on the fourth commandment. Mr. Irons presented to the Overseeing Session a 2-page paper containing 16 bullet-points titled, “What I Teach on the Sabbath.”

**November 13, 2000** – The Overseeing Session discussed with Mr. Irons his views on the fourth commandment.

**November 17, 2000** – At Mr. Irons’ request, the Ministerial Oversight Committee of the Presbytery met with Mr. Irons to hear his new scruples regarding the Sabbath.

**November 19, 2000** – Mr. Irons’ wife, Misty Irons, launched her personal website, [www.musingson.com](http://www.musingson.com), an evangelistic effort to reach out to homosexuals. Mrs. Irons posted her article titled, “A Conservative Christian Case for Civil Same-Sex Marriage.”

**February 3, 2001** – The report of the Ministerial Oversight Committee was presented to the Presbytery. The Committee reported that Mr. Irons had discovered that he must declare a scruple with regard to the wording of WCF XXI:7, specifically the phrase: “by a positive, moral and perpetual commandment binding all men in all ages.” He further stated that he realized that his view had implications with respect to WCF XIX:2. Mr. Irons also distributed “What I Teach on the Sabbath” to the Presbytery. The Presbytery took no action in response.

**February 4, 2001** – In the course of his regular expository series on Ephesians, Mr. Irons preached a sermon on Eph 2:15 titled “Is the Law Abolished?”

- March 29, 2001** – The Overseeing Session received a communication from a member of Redeemer Chapel, expressing his concern that Pastor Irons’ sermon “significantly departed from our church’s standards and thus the ordination vow.”
- March 29, 2001** – The Overseeing Session continues to discuss Mr. Irons’ view of the law. All session members had received a copy of the tape of the sermon preached February 4, 2001, “Is the Law Abolished?” Mr. Irons distributed “Married to Another,” a paper further elucidating his views on the Law.
- May 14, 2001** – At a meeting of the Overseeing Session, the Moderator, Mr. Donald Poundstone, expressed his opinion that Mr. Irons’ views were within the bounds of confessional orthodoxy. Three other members of the session expressed their doubts about this.
- September 25, 2001** – One of the three members of the session changed his view and said that after further investigation he didn’t think Mr. Irons’ views on the Law were as far from his own as he initially thought.
- November 15, 2001** – This is the first meeting of the Overseeing Session when Mr. Irons’ view of the Law is not on the docket as an item for discussion. Later, one member of the session asked the Moderator why that item had been dropped, and the Moderator answered that he thought the discussion to this point had shown that Mr. Irons’ views were not a violation of the system of doctrine.
- January 4, 2002** – Mr. Irons posted his wife’s article on his [www.upper-register.com](http://www.upper-register.com) website.
- February 24-26, 2002** – The link to Mrs. Irons’ article was posted on several Reformed internet discussion groups (e.g., the OPC discussion list, the Warfield list, and others). This set in motion significant discussion of the article throughout the Internet.
- March 6, 2002** – Mr. Irons wrote an email to eight friends containing slanderous and ungodly language.
- March 7, 2002** – The Overseeing Session engaged in a lengthy discussion of Mrs. Irons’ article. The session passed a motion instructing Mr. Irons to include a disclaimer on [www.upper-register.com](http://www.upper-register.com) stating that the items on the site have not been approved by the session, nor do they represent the official position of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. The session also instructed the web master of the church’s website to remove the links to Mr. Irons’ personal websites. In addition, one member of the session came prepared to bring charges against Mrs. Irons for an offense in the area of conduct, namely, disturbing the peace, purity and/or unity of the church. Mr. Irons took responsibility for posting Mrs. Irons’ article on his website, and the charge was not presented in order to revise its wording and prefer the charge against Mr. Irons at the Presbytery level.
- March 11, 2002** – Mr. Irons took down his wife’s article from his website and put up an apology in its place. Mr. Irons apologized for posting an article and said that the term “same-sex civil unions” should have been used instead of “same-sex civil marriage” in order to avoid giving the misleading impression that these unions are in any way truly “marriage” as defined by God.
- March 22, 2002** – Mr. Irons wrote a letter of repentance to the Presbytery for his sinful March 6 email.
- March 30, 2002** – A special meeting of Presbytery was called to present four charges against Mr. Irons. The Presbytery handed the matter over to the Judicial Committee to conduct a preliminary investigation and report back at a future meeting.

Charge 1, brought by Messrs. Keller, Byer, and Thibault: Charged Mr. Irons with promoting and encouraging those who violate the seventh commandment, by posting on the “Upper Register” web page a paper titled, “A Conservative Christian Case for Civil Same-Sex Marriage.”

Charge 2, brought by Messrs. Pontier and Zuelch: Charged Mr. Irons with violating the ninth commandment, by distributing a letter in which he slandered the OPC as well as several individuals in the church.

Charge 3, brought by Messrs. Pontier and Zuelch: Charged Mr. Lee Irons with the violation of his ordination vow by teaching, contrary to the Word of God and the secondary standards of the OPC, that the Decalogue is to be interpreted exclusively in a “redemptive-historical” manner, etc.

Charge 4, brought by Messrs. Keller and Thibault: Charged the Rev. Lee Irons with the violation of the second ordination vow by his teaching on the moral law. Specifications 2-3 included Mr. Irons’ views on the role of the moral law with regard to *civil government*.

**June 1, 2002** – The Judicial Committee reported back. In view of Mr. Irons’ letter of March 22 and further expressions of repentance, Mr. Irons was granted forgiveness and Charge 2 was dropped. The Presbytery formally adopted Charges 1 and 3 in an amended form, and recommitted Charge 4 to the Judicial Committee for further refinement.

**July 19, 2002** – In response to Charge 1, Mr. Irons sent his paper “What I Believe About Homosexuality” to the Presbytery. The clerk sent it out via the presbytery e-mail list.

**July 20, 2002** – Presbytery met and made some modifications to the charges. As a result of dropping Charge 2 on June 1, the charges were re-numbered: Charge 3 became the new Charge 2, and Charge 4 became the new Charge 3. Here are the charges in their final form:

Charge 1: Charged Mr. Irons with publicly promoting and encouraging the practice of homosexuality, in violation of the seventh commandment.

Charge 2: Charged Mr. Irons with violating his ordination vows by teaching, contrary to the Scriptures and the Westminster Standards, that the Decalogue is no longer binding on believers as the standard of holy living.

Specification 1: That Mr. Irons has, on numerous occasions, publicly called into question the teaching of the Westminster Standards regarding the moral law.

Specification 2: That Mr. Irons has denied that the Decalogue, as a summary of the moral law, continues to have binding authority over the Christian.

Charge 3: Charged Mr. Irons with violating his ordination vows by teaching, contrary to the Scriptures and the Westminster Standards, that civil government must be religiously neutral, and therefore not subject to the binding authority of God’s special revelation in Scripture (including the moral law).

Having adopted these three charges, the first meeting of the trial judicatory was held. (This was a preliminary step in which the Presbytery determined that the specifications, if proved true, would support the charges and that the charges, if proved true, would constitute offenses serious enough to warrant a trial. In addition, the text of the finalized charges was formally given to Mr. Irons.)

The second meeting of the trial judicatory (i.e., the actual trial) was scheduled for September 20-21, 2002.

**September 4, 2002** – Mr. Irons sent his two papers in response to Charges 2 and 3 to the members of Presbytery by email, followed by hard copies via regular mail.

**September 15, 2002** – Because of Mr. Irons’ lengthy written responses to the charges, the Judicial Committee, chaired by Mr. Roger Wagner, was not prepared to prosecute the case as originally scheduled. With the consent of Mr. Irons and his counsel, the first session of the second meeting of the trial judicatory was postponed.

**October 18-19, 2002** – The second meeting of the trial judicatory having been postponed, the Presbytery determined to reschedule the start of the trial for December 13-14, with a projected third meeting on January 10-11, 2003. In addition, the Presbytery, at the recommendation of the Judicial Committee, withdrew Charge 1 without prejudice in light of new and better evidence, which was now available, namely, Mr. Irons’ paper “What I Believe About Homosexuality.” The phrase “without prejudice” meant that the same or similar charge could have been introduced in the future if deemed appropriate, but that never occurred.

**December 13-14, 2002** – Second meeting of the trial judicatory was held. Mr. Irons pled “not guilty.” Mr. Wagner, the prosecutor on behalf of the Presbytery, read the Presbytery’s paper regarding Charge 2. Mr. Irons testified and was cross-examined for several hours. Mr. T. David Gordon, a minister in the PCA, testified that Mr. Irons’ views were within the bounds of confessional orthodoxy.

**January 10, 2003** – Third meeting of the trial judicatory was opened. The presentations of the prosecution and defense were concluded. After a period of deliberation and on separate roll call votes the specifications of Charge 2 were sustained. On a final 17-16 vote by secret ballot Charge 2 was sustained, and Mr. Irons was found guilty of the charge.

**January 11, 2003** – The Presbytery voted to give Mr. Irons the censure of indefinite suspension from office. By standing vote of 17-17, the Presbytery failed to deem Charge 3 to be serious enough (if proven) to warrant a trial. The defense gave informal notice of intent to appeal conviction on Charge 2. The trial judicatory adjourned.

**February 10, 2003** – Mr. Irons sent his appeal from the judgment of the Presbytery to the Rev. Donald J. Duff, Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the OPC.

Specification of error 1: The Presbytery erred in finding that Mr. Irons has called into question the teaching of the Westminster Standards regarding the moral law.

Specification of error 2: The Presbytery erred in judging the teaching of Mr. Irons ... to be “a violation of the system of doctrine contained in the Holy Scriptures as that system of doctrine is set forth in our Confession of Faith and Catechisms.”

**April 22, 2003** – The Overseeing Session of Redeemer Chapel, after a 15-month investigation of Mrs. Irons and her website, decided not to pursue discipline against her, although it did “request” her to remove the offending article.

**June 25 – July 2, 2003** – The 70th General Assembly of the OPC met at Dordt College in Sioux Center, Iowa. Advisory Committee 10-A, chaired by Mr. John Fesko, met with Mr. Irons, Mr. T. David Gordon, Mr. Roger Wagner (representing the Presbytery), and Dr. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. With

one abstention and no negative votes, the Advisory Committee recommended that the Irons appeal be sustained and concluded that:

Mr. Irons' teaching, having biblical weight and representing one stream of the Reformed tradition, is within the bounds of confessional orthodoxy. However, we are concerned that Mr. Irons proceeded to make public comments critical of the secondary standards without sufficiently bringing these matters to the attention of his fellow elders. We are equally concerned that the Presbytery of Southern California proceeded to judicial process prior to adequate discussion with Mr. Irons on these matters.

On June 30, the matter came to the floor of the GA and occupied 10 hours in debate. The 70th GA denied Mr. Irons' appeal on two motions:

Shall specification of error 2 of the Irons appeal be sustained? Yea: 46; Nay: 72.

Shall specification of error 1 of the Irons appeal be sustained? Yea: 55; Nay: 66.

**August 27, 2003** – The Moderator of the Overseeing Session stated on the OPC Discussion List that Mrs. Irons is a member of the OPC in good standing; that there are no charges pending against her; and that, while many members of the session believe that some of her opinions are in error, they have not been convinced that she has committed an offense which would constitute a denial of a credible profession of faith.

**September 19, 2003** – Mr. Irons wrote a letter to the Presbytery in response to the action of the 70th GA indicating his intention to peaceably withdraw from the OPC.

**October 17-18, 2003** – The Presbytery met for its third stated meeting. On October 18, the Irons matter was dealt with. After Mr. Irons read his September 19 letter, the Presbytery passed the following motion:

It was moved that presbytery, based on his expression of repentance, grant forgiveness to Mr. Irons 1) for proceeding to make public comments critical of the Confession without sufficiently bringing these matters to the attention of the presbytery, and 2) for proceeding to publicize his differences with the Confession before receiving our counsel, and 3) for failing to express his disagreements with us in a more charitable manner.

The Presbytery was led in prayer. The Clerk moved that, since Mr. Irons' appeal had been denied at the 70th GA, the Presbytery proceed immediately to pronounce the censure. Mr. Irons renounced the jurisdiction of the OPC. It was moved as a substitute motion that he be erased from the rolls of Presbytery as an act of discipline without full process. The Moderator ruled that the substitution motion was in order. The Moderator's ruling was appealed. There was significant debate as to whether the motion was in order, but the ruling of the chair was sustained. The Presbytery denied the substitute motion and passed the Clerk's main motion by a vote of 25 Yes and 10 No. Mr. Irons presented himself, and the Moderator pronounced the censure of indefinite suspension upon him. Prayer was offered for Mr. Irons' repentance.

**December, 2003** – The Moderator of the Presbytery appointed a committee of two to attempt to dissuade Mr. Irons from renouncing the jurisdiction of the OPC. Mr. Irons declined to meet with the dissuasion committee on the ground that the GA's decision was final and that he could not repent of his views of the Law.

**February 7, 2004** – The minutes of Presbytery state: “On amended motion Presbytery erased the name of Charles Lee Irons from its roll of ministerial members because he has renounced the jurisdiction of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church by declaring himself independent (BD V:2.b.(1)).” It was “on amended motion” because the original motion as proposed by the dissuasion committee incorrectly said that Mr. Irons renounced the jurisdiction of the OPC “by abandoning his ministry therein.” This was amended to “by declaring himself independent” and passed in that form.

Several implications of the February 7 action:

(1) Mr. Irons did not escape the censure, but was under censure for 3½ months, from October 18, 2003 to February 7, 2004.

(2) By accepting Mr. Irons’s renunciation of its jurisdiction and erasing him from its ministerial rolls, the Presbytery terminated the censure of indefinite suspension from office.

(3) Instead of accepting his withdrawal and erasing his name, the Presbytery could have proceeded to increase the censure by deposing Mr. Irons from office. It did not do so. As a result, in the OPC’s eyes, Mr. Irons is an independent minister no longer affiliated with the OPC.

**February 12, 2004** – The Clerk of Presbytery, Rev. Donald Buchanan, wrote a letter, addressed to “Rev. C. Lee Irons” informing him of the Presbytery’s action of February 7.