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This issue of *Theology Matters* contains articles that will help you prepare for the debate on Amendment B in your presbytery. Amendment B would replace the specific biblical standards of G-6.0106b, “Fidelity and Chastity,” and clear the way for the ordination of practicing, unrepentant homosexual persons.

The Pastoral Dilemma

by Thomas Gillespie

When unavoidable controversial issues affect people we know and care about, as is the case in the current public ecclesial debate on homosexuality, the human factor is crucial in the disputation. Those who seek love in same-sex relationships are people—sometimes family or colleagues, or as with pastors, members of our congregation. Thomas E. Schmidt reminds us of the importance of the personal dimension of the issue in his book, *Straight & Narrow? Compassion and Clarity in the Homosexuality Debate*:

These are people with faces, people with names, often Christian people, and whatever we conclude about the larger issues their stories represent, we must never lose sight of their individual struggles, their individual pain, their faces. If we neglect faces, we neglect the gospel.¹

In that concluding sentence, Professor Schmidt articulates the pastoral dilemma. How shall I deal with this issue in such a way that I neglect neither the faces of the homosexual people I know and care about nor the gospel of Jesus Christ? Put positively, how shall I, as a minister of the gospel, serve the homosexual people I know (and don't know) in my congregation?

My understanding of the gospel, as well as that of the Reformed theological tradition in which I stand, has been shaped in no small measure by the canonical letters of the apostle Paul. In Rom. 1:16, he declares

programmatically that the gospel is “the power of God unto salvation for everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” The gospel is power, God's power, God's saving power. From what then does the gospel save us? Paul argues in Romans that the gospel delivers us from: (1) the power of sin to oppress us (Romans 6); (2) the power of the Law to condemn us (Romans 7); and (3) the power of death to hold us (Romans 8). Those thus liberated are declared just before God, and in their liberation God demonstrates his own justice. “For in [the gospel] the justice of God is revealed” (Rom. 1:17).

With regard to the oppression of sin, Paul gives examples elsewhere of the gospel's liberating power. Of special interest is a text that relates the power of the gospel explicitly to the issue of homosexuality, 1 Cor. 6:9-11. The literary location of this brief passage

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is a section of 1 Corinthians (5:1-6:20) in which the apostle is addressing two instances of behavior in the Corinthian congregation that do not honor the gospel, one a matter of incest (5:1-13) and the other a case of fraud (6:1-11). In speaking to these matters, Paul introduces a series of “vice catalogues” (as they are called in New Testament scholarship) that give specificity to the ways in which sin evidences itself as an oppressive force in human life (5:10,11, and 6:9-10).² In the first (5:10) he lists the sexually immoral, the greedy, robbers, and idolaters. In the second (5:11) he repeats the list and adds to it revilers and drunkards. In the third (6:9-10) he warns that “wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God” and identifies the endangered as all those previously mentioned, plus thieves. Further, the sexually immoral are now specified as fornicators, adulterers, male prostitutes, and sodomites.³

Before stating the point that I wish to make from this third vice catalogue, however, it is imperative that we notice two important features of these three lists. The first is that sexual sins are not singled out for exclusive attention, but are conjoined with sins of economic injustice (perpetrated in a variety of ways by the greedy, robbers, and thieves) and the sin of religious idolatry. The second notable feature of these lists is that sexual immorality is specified first as heterosexual fornication and adultery, and only then is it further identified as homosexual behavior; which is to say that the latter is no lesser or greater an instance of sin than the former.

Unfortunately, in my judgment 1 Cor. 6:9-11 has been used in the debate on homosexuality primarily to establish the biblical view that same-gender sex is sinful. What is often neglected is the concluding verse, which attests to the power of the gospel to liberate people from conditions and consequences of behavior that is subject to divine indictment. The text reads:

And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God. (1 Cor. 6:11)

Imagine such a congregation. Not *all*, to be sure, but *some* nonetheless were—in their pre-Christian lives—greedy, robbers and thieves. Some were drunkards and revilers. And, yes, some were fornicators, adulterers, male prostitutes, and sodomites. That was then, however. The *past tense of the verb* is crucial to our understanding of what the apostle is saying: “And this is what some of you *were*.” Now the situation is different. These very people were *washed, sanctified, and justified* in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of God.

Gordon D. Fee calls this text “one of the more important theological statements in the epistle.”⁴ He explains:

As in 1:30, the three verbs are primarily metaphors of salvation, each expressing a special facet of their conversion in the light of the preceding sentences: they had been “washed” from the filth of their former life-styles expressed in the preceding list; they had been “sanctified,” set apart by God for holy, godly living that stands in stark contrast to their former wickedness; though formerly “unjust,” they had been justified, so that now right with God they may inherit the kingdom that before they could not.... Finally, since the three verbs refer to the same reality, and since each of them has “God” as the implied subject, the two prepositional phrases are to be understood as modifying all three verbs. The latent Trinitarianism of the sentence, therefore, is difficult to escape. God has effected salvation “in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit.”⁵

The significance of this exegetical commentary on 1 Cor. 6:11 is its assurance that here we are not skating near the blue ice of the canon where its central witness to the gospel is thin. Rather, that witness is firmly attested in terms of the gospel’s cleansing, sanctifying, and justifying power to effect transformation of human life, including, and in particular, its moral character. Idolatry, greed and thievery, fornication and adultery may be deeply ingrained patterns of human conduct, but they are not *necessary* patterns because of the gospel. The same is true, Paul attests, of those given to same-gender sex. Evidently, there were faces in the Corinthian church whose experience of the gospel confirmed the apostle’s assertion.

Undergirding and informing this apostolic statement of the need for the possibility of homosexual transformation is the biblical understanding of creation. What qualifies homosexual liaisons for inclusion on Paul’s vice list is stipulated in his discussion of this topic in Rom. 1:26-27. Put simply, they are “against nature” (Greek *para physin*, v. 26). The apostle is speaking here, of course, in the idiom of the Stoics. But the term *nature*, as used here, is if not *baptized* by Paul the Christian, then at least *circumcised* by Paul, the Hellenistic Jew. For the Hellenistic Jew characteristically filtered Stoic terms through the medium of Jewish monotheism and thus identified *nature* with God’s Law and creative intention.⁶

Two comments by German New Testament ethicist Wolfgang Schrage are pertinent here. The first is that in Rom. 1:26 “*physis* designates what is consonant with the order of creation.” The second is that for Paul, “Marriage is consonant with the created order.”⁷ The divine intention for human sexual relations, as attested in the Genesis accounts of creation and affirmed by

Jesus, is the union of male and female in marriage (Gen. 2:24; see also Matt. 19:1-6).⁸ It is this norm that makes homosexual behavior (as well as fornication and adultery) for Paul “a tragic distortion of the created order.”⁹ It is this distortion (among others) that God transforms by the power of the gospel to cleanse, sanctify and justify (1 Cor. 6:11). Such, in brief, is the pastoral response of the apostle Paul to the faces of those he knew and cared about who engaged in homosexual practice.

How then should the pastoral dilemma be resolved? Because the gospel is “the power of God unto salvation” (Rom. 1:16), I am faithful to the faces of the people I know and care about when I tell them the gospel truth: that the power of the triune God is at work in and through the good news of Jesus Christ to liberate all from the oppression of sin, whether their particular vices are sexual or nonsexual, and, if the former, whether they are heterosexual or homosexual in kind.

1. Thomas E. Schmidt, *Straight & Narrow? Compassion & Clarity in the Homosexuality Debate* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1995), 11.
2. Wolfgang Schrage, “Vices are not petty offenses but signs of human sinfulness...” *The Ethics of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 129. For other examples of such lists in the Pauline corpus, see 2 Cor. 12:20-21; Gal. 5:19-21; Rom. 1:29-31; Col. 3:5, 8; Eph. 5:3-5; 1 Tim. 1:9-11; 2 Tim. 3:2-5; Tit. 3:3; see also Mark 7:21-22; 1 Pet. 2:1; 4:3; Rev. 21:8; 22:15.

3. The terminology here is from the New Revised Standard Version, as are all citations from the biblical text.
4. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 245.
5. *Ibid.*, 246.
6. Richard B. Hays, “Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to John Boswell’s Exegesis of Romans 1”, *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 14 (1986), 196.
7. Schrage, 204-5.
8. For an insightful discussion of marriage as “a natural institution of which the New Testament has a good deal to say,” see Oliver O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), 69-71.
9. Hays, 207.

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Offended: How My Family Offended and Brought Me Back to Christ by Mike Goeke

A recent article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* touted the merger of 1,400 “open and affirming” churches (meaning churches that affirm homosexual identity and behavior) with the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. The article stated that leaders in the gay rights movement consider their biggest challenge to be that of convincing Christians that homosexual behavior is not a sin. I saw a part of this movement when I spoke recently at a gathering of pastors and church leaders from a denomination that is heavily divided over the issue of homosexuality. One man spoke of his desire that everyone be welcome at his church, and that they be ‘inclusive’ and, especially, that no one leave their church “offended” by what they hear. Of course, this

was not the first time I had heard these types of thoughts. Many people I talk to, including pastors and parents and friends, are concerned that they not “offend” gay people.

Let me just say a hearty “THANK YOU” to my wife, and my parents and family, and my friends, who cared enough about me to offend me! I get a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach when I consider the ramifications in my life had the people in my world bought into the lie that to love me was to affirm my homosexuality. When I left my wife to pursue homosexuality, she boldly told me that she knew God could work in me and in our marriage and that she would not pursue divorce. She protected her

interests but always professed her love for me and her desire to work through this together. My parents (and other family members) told me that what I was doing was wrong. They found Exodus, got materials, and tried to get me to talk to a counselor. They also called frequently to check on me, sent me money when I needed it, came to see me on my birthday, and flew me home for holidays. My friends drove hours to talk to me about what I was doing, and told me what they believed. They flew from other towns to take me to dinner and tried to convince me to get help and to turn from what I was doing. They also sent me cards and letters full of love and affirmation of our friendship.

And each of them offended me. Each of them made me angry. I viewed them as bigoted, and unenlightened, and ignorant, and prejudiced, and hateful. If they truly loved me, I told them, they would accept my homosexuality and affirm me in the lifestyle I was living. I ignored their calls and I viewed them with skepticism. I did my best to sever my relationships with those who were offending me. But they would not let me go. They did not coddle me, but they refused to give up on me.

When I finally took *You Don't Have to be Gay* from my Dad, just to shut him up, I was ready to draw a line in the sand and cut all ties with my wife, my family and my friends. But the time planned by God for the piercing of my heart had come. As I have said many times, that book showed me more than the sentimental, saccharine love of Jesus that gay theology had sold me. It showed me the powerful love of the risen Savior, and I was compelled back to Him by that love. The offending

parties in my life were waiting, as loving and gracious as they had ever been...not holding my sin against me, but standing there, ready to walk the journey out of homosexuality alongside of me.

Today my marriage is restored and has grown beyond my imagination. I have three beautiful children and am living out the call on my life to vocational ministry. Healing has happened in my family relationships, and I am closer to that cadre of friends than ever before. As I listen to people debate the "gay" issue and talk of affirmation and inclusivity of homosexuality, I wonder where I would be today had Stephanie accepted my claim that I had always been gay and would always be gay and pursued divorce like I wanted her to do. I wonder where I would be if my parents had joined PFLAG and supported me in my quest to live homosexually. I wonder where I would be if my friends had encouraged me to divorce Stephanie and had rallied around me in my homosexuality. I wonder where I would be if my pastors and spiritual shepherds had encouraged me to accept the very thing I needed to lay before the cross of Christ. I shudder at the thought. I know it must have killed them to think of losing me, but they loved me enough to take that risk. THANK YOU, dear friends, for your offense to me. At the time, the Truth you shared was the aroma of death to me (II Cor. 2:15) but today it is the sweet fragrance of LIFE.

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Change in Homoerotic Behavior and Feelings is Possible: Genetics Play Only a Weak and Indirect Role

by Christopher H. Rosik

There are a limited but growing number of current empirical studies that address the question of the potential for change in same-sex attraction and behavior. In the interest of brevity, this analysis will focus on the most prominent of these studies. The reader seeking to gain further education in this literature is encouraged to review other studies that provide background and research data on attempts to modify same-sex attraction and behavior (Byrd & Nicolosi, 2002; Nicolosi, Byrd, & Potts, 2000; Rosik, 2001, 2003; Schaeffer, Hyde, et al.,

2000; Schaeffer, Nottebaum, et al., 2000; Throckmorton, 1998).

Landmark Research by Robert Spitzer

The first landmark study in this area was conducted by Robert Spitzer (2003). This study is important in many respects. The first point has to do with the background of the author. Spitzer is widely recognized as the architect of the American Psychiatric Association's

(APA) 1973 decision to remove homosexuality from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM). He only decided to study the issue of change in sexual orientation after talking with several ex-gays who were protesting the APA's stance opposing change efforts at the 1999 APA convention. Prior to his study, Spitzer believed that while homosexual behavior could be resisted, no one could really change his or her sexual orientation. He now believes that some people can and do change. Moreover, Spitzer has described himself publicly as an "atheist Jew." Given all these facts, it is impossible to view his study as being the product of antihomosexual, self-serving, political or religious bias, common terms used to dismiss most of the other relevant studies supportive of change efforts. Spitzer's data, however, align nicely with what prior studies have reported.

Secondly, Spitzer's (2003) study significantly improved on the earlier research by carefully assessing for the emotional components of homosexual experience (e.g., subjective ratings of sexual attraction, sexual fantasies during masturbation and heterosexual sex). He also limited his subject pool to individuals reporting at least five years of sustained change from a homosexual to a heterosexual orientation, obtaining a sample of 200 eligible respondents who he personally interviewed. Using fairly strict criteria, Spitzer found 66% of male participants and 44% of female subjects had achieved good heterosexual functioning. Of the 33 men who rated most extreme on the homosexual indicators, a surprising 67% achieved good heterosexual functioning. While 20% of the sample reported being heterosexually married prior to change attempts, 76% of the men and 47% of the women reported being married at the time of the interview. Even though 42% of the men and 46% of the women reported their sexual attraction to be exclusively homosexual before change attempts, 17% of the men and 55% of the women indicated exclusive heterosexual attraction upon interview. Depression was indicated as a problem prior to change efforts by 43% of the men and 47% of the women, while these statistics had fallen to current levels of 1% and 4%, respectively.

Recent Study by Jones and Yarhouse Confirms Earlier Findings

More recently, Jones and Yarhouse (2007) summarized the initial findings of their important study on change of unwanted homosexuality, which followed 73 participants involved in Exodus International affiliated ministries over a three year period. This longitudinal research design allowed for stronger conclusions to be made about causation than can occur with typical correlational studies. Across several respected measures of sexual experience, the authors concluded that on average, significant change away from homosexual orientation

and toward heterosexual orientation was documented. They further observed that the average movement away from homosexual orientation was medium to large, while the average movement toward heterosexual orientation was somewhat smaller. Contrary to the prevailing wisdom, participants who reported the strongest degree of same-sex attractions also reported the most significant changes toward heterosexual functioning. No meaningful evidence of harm from participants' attempts to change was discovered.

Nature, Nurture and the Church's Ministry

For the most part, subjects who report experiencing improvement in heterosexual functioning are devoutly religious and often indicate that their relationship with God is an important factor in their ability to change. The best integrative theories about the causes of homoerotic attraction suggest that several interacting factors are involved to varying degrees in any one individual. The primary influences are thought to be of genetic, biological, developmental, and psychosocial origin. This has implications for understanding the issue of change. It suggests that many homosexual persons, especially men, cannot simply choose to feel heterosexual attraction. Change takes courage, motivation, and perseverance. Even then, some will probably have to contend with a certain degree of homosexual feelings throughout their lives.

Yet it is also incorrect to say that people are born gay, lesbian or bisexual, at the very least in terms of being anatomically designed for homoerotic behavior. Human sexuality is much more complex than eye color, and developmental, social, and cultural influences cannot be left out of the equation. The best twin studies now indicate that genetics play only a weak and indirect role in the development of homosexuality (Bailey, Dunne, & Martin, 2000; Bearman & Bruckner, 2002). Identical twins have identical genes and upbringing, but the odds are only about 1 in 10 that both twins will report same-sex attractions. Even the American Psychological Association has now gone on record as endorsing the perspective that sexual orientation is not determined by any particular factor but likely includes influences from both nature and nurture (APA, 2008). The studies by Spitzer (2003) and Jones and Yarhouse (2007) underscore that change in same-sex attraction is a viable outcome for some and that for many others less than complete modification of homoerotic feelings still results in significant improvement in psychological well-being and spiritual satisfaction. Those within our denomination who desire to increase their heterosexual potential deserve our compassion and assistance in the journey, not our complicity in the untruth that real change never occurs.

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Ordination of Sexually Active Gay Men and Lesbians

by Christopher Rosik

Lately I have been reading many letters containing *pro and con* arguments for overturning the Presbyterian Church's ordination standard. That standard now limits positions of leadership to those who maintain fidelity in heterosexual marriage or chastity in singleness.

Social and theological liberals tend to argue from biology and/or theology that the biblical prohibition against homosexual conduct is antiquated. According to their argument, certain homosexual sexual behavior among religious leaders should be exempted from this exclusion.

In response to this, I have offered some observations and related questions that I believe need to be answered by anyone who argues for such an exception to the historic religious standard—i.e., that sexual contact is reserved for heterosexual marriage:

- (1) We should not treat gay men and lesbians as a monolithic group. In fact, a good body of research provides a convincing rationale for differentiating between lesbians and gay men in

terms of erotic plasticity (Baumeister, 2000). For example,

Whisman (1996) found a higher percentage of lesbians (31%) than gay men (18%) who described their sexual orientation as being a conscious, deliberate choice. Rosenbluth (1997) found that 58% of 90 lesbian couples reported choosing their current sexual orientation.

This raises an interesting question. If equal access to positions of religious leadership is predicated on homosexual orientation being *created by God* and not chosen, then what do we do with those (primarily) lesbians whose same-sex involvement is consciously chosen? To be consistent with the premise, these lesbians would need to be singled out for exclusion. If they are not, then the creation argument is given the appearance of being disingenuous.

Of course, individuals who experience some same-sex attraction but remain committed to fidelity in heterosexual marriage or chastity in singleness may still be perfectly able to serve in an ordained capacity.

(2) How we treat bisexuality discloses a great deal about the philosophical consistency of our position regarding homosexuality. Zinik (1985) defined the bisexual person as having:

- (a) the capacity for sexual arousal by members of both sexes,
- (b) sexual activity or sexual desire for sexual contact with both men and women, and
- (c) self-identification as being bisexual.

This definition remains fairly well accepted today.

Much emphasis is placed by social liberals on affirming faithful (and, I assume, sexually monogamous) homosexual relationships, since it is assumed that God created the homosexual attraction. But bisexuality poses a serious challenge for adherents of this line of thinking, since bisexuals are typically considered to have, by nature, sexual inclinations toward both sexes between which they can simultaneously choose.

What would one do if a candidate for ordination indicated that he or she was bisexual? Should they be required to limit themselves to faithful sexual activity with only one person of the opposite (or same) sex? Would this not be a denial of their true nature?

In addition, if we mandate that bisexuals deny their nature in order to be ordained, then wouldn't this policy support what traditionalists have been saying all along--that biblical faithfulness may legitimately require sexual self-denial?

Or, perhaps bisexuals should be allowed to have "faithful" sexual relationships with two people—one man and one woman. This would appear to be consistent with the premise of bisexuality as God-given...but then, having two partners clearly violates the biblical mandate of sexual monogamy. Such a solution suggests that ultimately, sexual monogamy is unimportant in either homosexual or heterosexual relationships.

It seems clear to me that any religious leader arguing in favor of ordaining sexually active homosexual persons *simply must indicate how they will resolve the problems posed by bisexuality*. Indeed, the plight of bisexuals appears inextricably linked to that of gay men and lesbians within the sexual-minority community.

(3) The situation with transgendered individuals raises still further questions. Transgender is a term used to describe persons who have a persistent and distressing discomfort with their assigned gender. They are born anatomically as one biological sex, but live their lives to varying degrees as the opposite sex. The limited number of gender-dysphoric persons who

I have seen clinically (prior to any sex reassignment surgery) take it as a "given" that their condition is due to some neurobiological problem. The scientific literature generally supports this notion, at least for a group of "core" gender dysphoric people, although psychosocial factors probably play a greater or lesser role in any individual case. But if we accept this conclusion, then clearly the origins of transgenderism are not part of God's creative intent.

So then if a transgendered person seeks ordination, it appears that the logical argument in support of ordination would be that the person was born with a biological defect for which they were not responsible and which sex reassignment surgery corrected. Again, this is very different than celebrating transgenderism as part of the intended rainbow of God's sexually diverse world.

If we are told the church must ordain practicing homosexual persons because the homosexual was "born that way," then shouldn't the church also accept into leadership transgendered persons only on the basis that they are "designed that way" by their maker as well?

How does one resolve this inconsistency without undermining the rationale of those in the church who now say it is God's intent that we bless homosexual relationships? Or is their whole argument a smoke screen?

Generally, when I ask these questions, I am struck by the silence that I receive. Only a few people respond with counter views, and those few do not seem able to grasp my point.

I invite religiously oriented readers to try out these questions where such issues are at stake, and see if you receive a more satisfactory response than I seem able to obtain. There is too much at stake for the faith community to allow their leaders to leave such questions unasked and unanswered.

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Jesus Christ, Scripture, and the Confessions: A Response to Amendment B

by James R. Edwards

Amendment B proposes deleting the current text of G-6.0106b, which on the basis of “obedience to Scripture” defines and limits the covenant of marriage to a man and a woman. Amendment B would replace G-6.0106b with the following paragraph:

Those who are called to ordained service in the church, by their assent to the constitutional questions for ordination and installation (W-4.4003), pledge themselves to live lives obedient to Jesus Christ the Head of the Church, striving to follow where he leads through the witness of the Scriptures, and to understand the Scriptures through the instruction of the Confessions. In so doing, they declare their fidelity to the standards of the Church. Each governing body charged with examination for ordination and/or installation establishes the candidate’s sincere efforts to adhere to these standards.

At first glance, the proposed paragraph looks innocuous. It may even seem to improve G-6.0106b because it shifts obedience from Scripture to obedience to Jesus Christ, which seems a higher form of obedience. I wish to argue that Amendment B is not an improvement, but rather a virus that weakens the church’s ordination standards and will inevitably open the door to the ordination of practicing gays and lesbians. Amendment B should be rejected.

Christology Cannot Be Separated From Scripture

There are two major problems with the proposed amendment. First, as the last sentence explicitly states, the amendment would dismantle denomination-wide ordination standards, and relegate ordination standards to each “governing body,” i.e., to each presbytery. The PCUSA has 173 presbyteries—and this change could result in as many different ordination standards in the denomination.

The second change relates to the “pledge to live lives obedient to Jesus Christ the Head of the Church.” This change is subtler and more dangerous, because obedience to Jesus Christ seems to be a self-evident good. The danger is cleverly cloaked in the wording of

the proposed amendment, but it is unmasked in the rationale supplied by the Presbytery of Boston, which proposed the amendment. In support of the amendment, the Presbytery of Boston writes this: “*Our church thus has bound itself to a hierarchy of authority in which we are to obey Jesus Christ its Head, and additionally, to heed first the Scriptures and then the confessions, to the extent that they accurately bear witness to Christ’s will.*” The fundamental “hierarchy of authority” set forth above separates Jesus Christ from Scripture. The rationale assumes that there is a knowledge of Jesus Christ separate from and superior to the knowledge of Jesus Christ that is attested in Scripture. The problem in the new wording of “obedience to Jesus Christ” now becomes apparent: obedience can only be rendered to a known particular, and without Scripture Christ is neither known or particular, but only imagined. In severing Jesus Christ from Scripture, Amendment B can transmute the historical Jesus of Scripture into a *concept* that can be defined apart from Scripture. In asserting that the Scriptures should be followed only “to the extent that they accurately bear witness to Christ’s will,” the Presbytery of Boston demotes Scripture to the category of a relative, non-essential, authority. This clearly jeopardizes or denies *sola Scriptura*, the essential Reformation doctrine that Scripture is the sole authority for the church’s theology and ethics. In its attempt to divorce Jesus Christ from Scripture, the Presbytery of Boston makes the astounding claim that “obedience to Scripture...is foreign to the Reformed understanding”! Amendment B thus sets the stage for a conflict between Scripture and Christ.

Amendment B has been subtly worded to allow for a “knowledge” of Jesus Christ apart from Scripture that could be set above the divinely inspired knowledge of Jesus Christ set forth in Scripture. In the name of “obedience to Jesus Christ the Head of the Church,” a candidate for ordination, or a presbytery, could appeal to Amendment B to approve an action, such as the approval of an avowed homosexual for ordination, that is expressly prohibited in Holy Scripture.

What knowledge does the church have of Jesus Christ apart from Scripture? On what basis would the church assert this supposed knowledge of Jesus Christ to be superior to the knowledge of Jesus Christ revealed in

Scripture? Herein lies the crux and danger in Amendment B. The church knows of no Jesus apart from the Jesus attested in Scripture. It might be objected that we know of Christ also through the Holy Spirit. It is of course true that the Holy Spirit reveals and confirms Jesus Christ to believers, but *the Holy Spirit does not and cannot bear testimony contrary to the Scripture that the Spirit inspired.*

The whole point of the Incarnation is that God reveals himself finally and unmistakably in Jesus of Nazareth in order to prevent humanity from misunderstanding and misrepresenting God by making God in its own image, either from human experience, culture, feelings, or intuition. The Incarnation allows God to be God, to define and reveal himself according to his image and will rather than to be misrepresented by false human substitutes. According to the testimony of the entire Christian tradition—Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant—the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament are “always, everywhere, and by all” to be received by the church as the essential and necessary witness to the divine revelation. They are “the one Word of God,” according to Barmen, to which the church can never be asked to add another source of revelation or authority.

The Testimony of the Book of Confessions

The hierarchy of Jesus Christ, Scripture, and Confessions is a false hierarchy, first because no confession in the *Book of Confessions* claims for itself, or for any other confession, an authority commensurate with Christ and Scripture. Second, no confession in the *Book of Confessions* makes a distinction between Christ and Scripture so as to suggest, as the triad does, that there is a Jesus Christ apart from and above Scripture.

The *Book of Confessions* repeatedly affirms that the Scriptures are the sole and sufficient source of saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. “In this Holy Scripture, the universal Church of Christ has the most complete exposition of all that pertains to a saving faith, and also to the framing of a life acceptable to God; and in this respect it is expressly commanded by God that nothing be either added to or taken from the same,” declares the *Second Helvetic Confession* (5.002). This declaration is corroborated in one form or another by every confession in the *Book of Confessions* except for the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Brief Statement of Faith. The *Scots Confession* declares Scripture to be the sufficient authority of God necessary to instruct and make perfect believers (3.19; see also *Heidelberg Catechism*, 4.018/019). The *Westminster Confession* declares that Scripture contains “the whole counsel of God...to which nothing at any time is to be added,

whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men” (6.006). In the words of the *Shorter Catechism*, Scripture “is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy [God]” (7.002; see *Larger Catechism*, 7:116).

The most undeniable witness to the Scriptures as the indispensable and necessary source of knowledge of Jesus Christ comes from *Barmen* and the *Confession of 1967*. *Barmen* declares that “Jesus Christ, *as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture*, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death” (italics added). *Barmen* expressly “rejects the false doctrine, as though the Church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God’s revelation” (8.11). Amendment B allows for the possibility of another “source of proclamation, apart from and besides this one Word of God” attested in Holy Scripture.

The *Confession of 1967* asserts with greater vigor “the authority of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as the Scriptures bear witness to him” (9.03). “The one sufficient revelation of God is Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate, to whom the Holy Spirit bears unique and authoritative witness through the Holy Scriptures, which are received and obeyed as the word of God written. The Scriptures are not a witness among others, but the witness without parallel. The church has received the books of the Old and New Testaments as prophetic and apostolic testimony in which it hears the word of God and by which its faith and obedience are nourished and regulated” (9.27).

The confessional tradition of the PCUSA acknowledges the Scriptures as the sole and necessary source of authority for the church’s faith and life. *Barmen* and the *Confession of 1967* warn the church against the temptation to accommodate and proclaim a Jesus compatible with cultural ideologies rather than the Jesus attested in Holy Scripture and preserved in the church’s creeds and confessions.

May the univocal warning of the church be heard and heeded, and on its basis may the PCUSA rightly reject Amendment B.

This is adapted with permission from a work shop presentation at the Presbyterian Coalition Gathering, October, 2008, in Newport Beach, CA.

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Amendment B was sent to the presbyteries with the recommendation that a discernment process be used before voting. This article identifies how discernment, which is consensus decision-making, can be used to manipulate the outcome of a vote.

Guidelines for Communal Discernment: **A Critique**

by Viola Larson

A booklet titled *Guidelines for Communal Discernment*, written by Victoria G. Curtiss, was used by the 218th General Assembly as a way to explore an alternative to parliamentary procedure for decision-making. When the Assembly decided to send the proposed change to the *Book of Order* that would replace G-6.0106b, it added the following comment: “Presbyteries are strongly encouraged to consider this overture using a process of listening and discernment.”

As we approach the vote on Amendment B, Presbyterians will benefit from understanding the differences between a “communal discernment process” and parliamentary procedure. We should be alert to the influences of process on the participants and the outcome. Further, we should be alert to how “spirituality” can become manipulative.

“Discernment” Process Seeks to Avoid a Vote

Although the *Guidelines* do not define communal discernment as “consensus decision-making,” the two concepts are basically the same. Communal discernment does not follow parliamentary procedure. Instead, a facilitator guides the discernment conversation using various techniques to help the members reach a decision. Decision-making using this process is complicated and even confusing. The facilitator or another member eventually offers what the *Guidelines* call a “trial balloon,” which is “a summary statement based on group input that expresses where the Holy Spirit seems to be leading the body.”

Various non-voting methods are suggested in the *Guidelines* to find out if the members of the group agree with the trial balloon. The trial balloon must be accepted or rejected, so in an attempt not to vote, several ideas are suggested. One is the five finger method, going from five fingers, “I am fully supportive,” to one finger, “I cannot support this at this time.” If a decision is not reached, several suggestions for resolving the dilemma are given, including “appoint a smaller group or a person to make the decision.” Thus the whole group’s responsibility is delegated to a smaller, less representative body—a contradiction of the intent of our form of government.

There are three problems with the kind of “discernment process” that is offered in this document. First, consensus decision-making manipulates participants. Second, the participants lose rights they would have under parliamentary procedure. Third, “spirituality” is used as a control mechanism.

Consensus Decision-making Manipulates Participants

The *Guidelines* say, “Discernment seeks more than group agreement. The goal is to recognize when ‘it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us’ (Acts 15:28).” But this is not contrary to parliamentary procedure; the guidance of the Holy Spirit is also a goal of parliamentary procedure in the church. The difference here between the two is that the author suggests some rather subjective ways of knowing if a decision is the will of the Holy Spirit. Such feelings and emotions as “God’s presence settling over the group in silence,” and a “joyous convergence of direction that brings a sense of peace and rightness,” are indicators for a final decision.

Marianne L. Wolfe, author of the booklet, *Parliamentary Procedures in the Presbyterian Church (USA)* explains that consensus decision-making “at its worst” is “manipulative and overpowering to the rights of the minority because it compels the minority to ‘break the unity of the body’ in order to disagree.” The *Guidelines* compound the problem. They say:

Consensus as used in [the Guidelines] does not mean unanimity. It refers to a shared sense of God’s presence as manifest through the group’s work together and through the decision reached. Members of the group affirm that they have been heard and are willing to move ahead in a common direction that most, if not all, have sensed to be the leading of the Holy Spirit. (emphasis added)

So the objective is not consensus in the *decision*, but consensus *about sensing the presence of God*. This is a dangerous move because now to be in ardent disagreement as a minority means not only breaking the unity of the body, but denying the felt presence of God in the work and decision.

Participants Lose Rights They Would Have Under Parliamentary Process.

Wolfe explains the rights of individuals in parliamentary principles:

Parliamentary principles attempt to balance the expression of individual conscience with the will of the majority. In so doing, these principles take very seriously the following rights of individuals in the body.

Wolfe then lists the “right to know,” the “right to speak,” and the “right to vote” as important themes behind the various procedures and rules in parliamentary governance. One sees immediately that “communal discernment” generally takes away the right to vote. But there are other losses as well.

Loss Of the Right To Know and To Be Heard

For instance, the right to know and the right to speak (or to be heard) are downgraded in “communal discernment.” This happens in several ways. The *Guidelines* suggest that groups larger than twenty persons should be divided into smaller groups. This means that presbyteries and committees at GA which use this method will be divided into smaller groups, each with a facilitator. Because of that division, each small group will not hear the whole committee’s comments. Those who find themselves in the minority in a small group will undoubtedly be alone and perhaps afraid to express their true feelings. Lacking the full committee, the minority person will experience the loss of hearing from those with whom they agree. The majority will miss hearing the thoughts of the minority who fail to speak because of timidity or even fear.

Another example of losing the right to know is given under the *Guidelines*’ subtitle “The Community listens to the Holy Spirit.” It says, “Participants need to practice the grace to lay aside ego, preconceived notions, biases, and predetermined conclusions that may limit openness to God in order to reach ‘holy indifference.’” However, if we do not speak our convictions and conclusions, those who hear us will be cheated out of knowing who we are and what we truly believe.

A further restriction on the right to know and to be heard is described in the *Guidelines* as follows:

Before a large group considers an issue, it is usually helpful for a subgroup, preferably consisting of persons with a variety of perspectives on the matter, to meet first to consider what information the larger body needs. It is helpful to distribute, in advance of the meeting, written material that defines the issue and provides background information as well as the rationale for a particular proposal, if there is one.

*Such material does not preclude the consideration of other options, but brings the whole body on board with the reflection **previously done by a few persons.** (emphasis added)*

Although other material may be looked at, this process leaves the larger group under the tyranny of a few, limits the focus of the group, and severely limits information. The right to know is once again limited.

“Spirituality” Is Used As A Control Mechanism

Debating and voting using parliamentary procedure follows definite rules. The “communal discernment” process, on the other hand, offers multiple rules to choose from and anchors them to subjective spiritual feelings as well as spiritual practices that are meant for far different settings. In addition, the *Guidelines* misuse the work and person of the Holy Spirit.

The *Guidelines* state that the Holy Spirit’s “movement...cannot be predicted or packaged.” The *Guidelines* give three theological principles for discernment. They rightly explain that Jesus Christ is head of the Church, but go on to misinterpret several texts that deal with the work of the Holy Spirit including John 14:16, 26 and 16:13. Their paraphrase separates the Holy Spirit from Scripture: “God sends us the Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth, to teach us everything, and to remind us of all that Jesus Christ said.” This separation of the participant’s inner feeling from Scripture is one of the most serious problems of the *Guidelines*’ process.

Calvin, commenting on John 16:13, writes, “The same Spirit led them [the apostles] into ‘**all truth**’ when they wrote down the substance of their teaching.” (emphasis added) Calvin is pointing out the connection between the Holy Spirit and Scripture. Likewise, Calvin writing on John 14:26 explains, “But observe what all these things are which he [Jesus] promises the Spirit will teach. He ‘**will remind you of everything I have said to you.**’” (emphasis added)

Commenting further, Calvin writes:

But the spirit that introduces any new idea apart from the Gospel is a deceiving spirit, and not the Spirit of Christ. Christ promises the Spirit who will confirm the Gospel teaching as if he were signing it.

The *Guidelines* go on to describe the Holy Spirit as “unpredictable,” and use the unpredictability to shape the process. When something or someone is unpredictable, there is a need to be open to the unexpected and the new. Thus the *Guidelines* exhort participants in the process to remain open to new ideas. They offer spiritual technologies to guide participants toward openness:

“there are spiritual practices that can enable us to be more receptive and attentive to God and one another and help us discern the mind of Christ.”

Lectio Divina As A Decision-making Device

Lectio Divina is another way commissioners lose their right to speak since this method only allows them to respond to someone else’s question on a selected passage of Scripture rather than allowing them to speak their own mind and consider the whole of Scripture.

Lectio Divina is a spiritual exercise in meditation meant for reflection and growth in faith. It is inappropriate as a substitute for parliamentary procedure in decision-making. The *Guidelines* suggest looking at several Scripture passages prior to the meeting, and then focusing on one at the meeting. At the meeting, questions are asked between each reading of the same Scripture, such as “What one word or phrase leaps out at you from the passage?”

To understand how this hinders a good decision, think of a Christian who is visited by two Jehovah’s Witnesses. They discuss the Trinity or the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Jehovah’s Witnesses are taught to stay with certain verses or passages when discussing one of their beliefs. They want to focus on just a few words and their meaning. That is control. But the wise Christian knows they will not get a true picture of the biblical view from just one verse or word. So it is with decision-making. In decision-making, Christians should allow the Holy Spirit to use the whole text, not just a phrase or a word.

Other Misuses of the Holy Spirit

There are other ways a misunderstanding of the Holy Spirit leads to the loss of the right to speak. The *Guidelines* insist that participants lay aside “their biases and predetermined conclusions.” They also encourage writing “on an index card anything that he or she is aware of that may block ‘holy indifference.’”

“Debate” vs. “Discernment”

The *Guidelines* make a comparison between “debate” and “discernment.” Debate, it says, uses “hard data to get to answers to problems; reasoning is made explicit.” Discernment, it says, uses “intellect/reason and affect/intuition: mind and spirit experience.” But there is no such necessary dichotomy. The Presbyterian engaging in debate is to seek to be guided by the Holy Spirit. The debater uses “reason and sound judgment” to understand how to obey God’s will as it is set forth in Scripture and to apply that to the situation at hand. It is in Scripture that the Church finds her final authority for decision-making—not in feelings or experiences, though feeling and experience may commend the Scripture to us.

The *Guidelines* offer another contrast between debate and discernment. Debate intends to resolve issues “by defeating or persuading” the “opposing side.” Discernment, by contrast, uncovers “a decision rather than [making] it” and discovers “what is most life-giving and loving by listening to [the] wisdom of the Holy Spirit and all voices.” In the *Guidelines*, debate “defends a viewpoint” while discernment “offers ‘holy indifference’ to all but God’s will.” The participant reading this could be intimidated, thinking that somehow debate is unholy, while practicing this kind of “discernment” is holy. Feeling this way he loses his right to speak what is in his heart and mind. This can only curtail his faithfulness to the other participants and to Jesus Christ. It is false and manipulative to portray debate as spiritually inferior to “discernment.”

There are numerous control mechanisms in *Guidelines for Communal Discernment*. They move from constant checking of the feelings and emotions of the participants, to the use of silence to refocus the group, to the actual use of a monitor who observes “the dynamics and interaction among group members, reminding the group of its norms and values, helping pace the process by tracking the time allotted, and recommending breaks or times out.”

Conclusion

For the PC(USA), a denomination racked by significant disagreements over vital doctrine and polity, and filled with distrust and lack of unity, *Guidelines for Communal Discernment* is simply more fuel to add to an already burning fire. In this kind of “discernment process,” consensus decision-making manipulates participants, the participants lose rights they would have under parliamentary procedure, and “spirituality” is used as a control mechanism—all under the guise of creating good will and unity in the Body of Christ.

In contrast, parliamentary procedure provides a fair and protected forum for an exchange of ideas and allows the majority to prevail while protecting minority rights. It enables Presbyterian government to be “ordered according to the Word by reason and sound judgment” (G-1.0100c). The glory belongs to Jesus Christ.

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The Protracted Struggle as a Spiritual Discipline

by James R. Edwards

There is a theory current today which maintains that change takes place at the edge of a system. The center of a system is usually fixed and static, and the outer periphery of a system is chaotic and without order. Neither stasis nor chaos is conducive, or usually even susceptible, to change. Change occurs—if it occurs at all—in the liminal area between these two extremes. Liminal is the Greek word for “shoreline,” the dividing line between fixed land and fluid water. In the meeting of these different elements a system is most responsive to change.

Peter’s Confession in Caesarea-Philippi

The well-known story in Matthew 16 about Jesus and the disciples *en route* to Caesarea Philippi is a story about change—and it takes place in a liminal region. Until this point in the gospel narratives, Jesus has ministered primarily in the northwest quadrant of the Sea of Galilee, which was securely Jewish. His ministry has been at the center of the system, in other words. At the midpoint of the gospels, however, Jesus sets out with the disciples for Caesarea Philippi 25 miles north of Galilee in the Tetrarchy of Philip. Caesarea Philippi was technically still Jewish, but it was precariously exposed to paganism. The city was named for the celebrated ruler of the occupying Romans, Augustus Caesar, and not for anything related to Judaism. Caesarea Philippi was further associated with the painful memory of Antiochus IV’s victory over Egypt in 200 B.C., causing Palestine to fall into the Seleucid sphere of influence. The Seleucids plunged Israel into a life-and-death struggle with pagan totalitarianism and the Maccabean Revolt. Caesarea Philippi was also the site of the famous sanctuary of Pan, the pagan god who was half man and half goat, the guardian of flocks. Caesarea Philippi was thus a center of nature worship—the veneration of the life-giving energies of Mother Earth, whose womb, as it were, gushed forth the headwaters of the Jordan River from a large cavity at the foot of Mt. Hermon. Caesarea Philippi was situated where Judaism met paganism—a classic liminal region. It was to such a place that Jesus took the disciples in Matthew 16.

On the way from Galilee to Caesarea Philippi Jesus and the disciples passed beneath a conspicuous promontory to the east that protruded into the sky. This marked the site of Gamla—“the camel’s hump.” Gamla evoked

within Jews of the day the same sentiments of heroism and courage that Valley Forge or the Alamo do for Americans today. The Jewish insurgency arose in Gamla in A.D. 6 when Augustus Caesar first taxed Palestine, and in the decades that followed Gamla fueled insurrection movements like the Sicarii (the Short Swords) and the Zealots. It was from Gamla—and places like it—that the hope of a *military* Messiah burned hotly and brightly. Thus, the journey northward from Galilee took the disciples first beneath the shadow of dissident and heterodox Jewish movements, and soon thereafter into a region rife with pluralistic paganism.

It was on *this* trip that Jesus asked the disciples the most important question of their lives: “Who do you say that I am?”

Caesarea Philippi introduced the disciples to competing religious and moral claims where they could not take refuge in the default answers of Jewish regions to the south. The answers that were obvious in Galilee or Jerusalem were not so obvious in Caesarea Philippi, where a free-market of options required the disciples to question, consider, and decide what they believed—and why they believed it. In this region of dangers and adversaries, in unscripted and unprotected ideological territory, Jesus presses the disciples for a confession.

Our Confession in a Post 2008 General Assembly

The PCUSA finds itself on a journey to Caesarea Philippi. How should we understand the journey? Are our theological differences and deadlocks signs of a healthy pluralism? Are they unfortunate circumstances that we need to outlast? Or are they catastrophes that we need to flee? I cannot possibly regard the embattled state of the PCUSA as a sign of health, for health does not lead to death, and our denomination is dying. Some may think we should ignore and simply outlast our opponents, but in the present hour I fear this option reflects only fateful resignation. Others in growing numbers believe the battle for orthodoxy in the denomination has been lost and they are leaving. Every time a healthy and faithful congregation leaves—and most leaving fit both categories—the cause of orthodoxy in the denomination is weakened.

How then should we understand the journey? The confession of Peter in Caesarea Philippi suggests another option. What if our predicament is not a misfortune, but the will of God? What if the PCUSA is being led to a liminal region where the church will be forced to decide whether culture is the lord of the church, or whether Christ as he is attested in Scripture is the Lord of the church? The prophet Hosea speaks of God leading Israel into the wilderness in order to renew his marriage vows with Israel and purge Israel's faith of Baal worship (Hos. 2:14-20). What if Christ is leading the church into a cacophonous and pluralistic culture in order to reacquaint the church with *his* voice, to awaken within the church a purer and less compromised confession of faith, to teach the church how to become a light to the culture rather than remain a mirror of it?

On the road to Caesarea Philippi the disciples had to decide whether Jesus was another manifestation of something that had gone before—a *reappearance* of John the Baptist, or of Elijah, or of Jeremiah—or whether Jesus was unique and without any precedent or successor, “the Christ, the Son of the living God”? On our road to Caesarea Philippi we must face a similar set of questions, whether Jesus Christ and the gospel are interchangeable with other cultural beliefs and icons, whether he is simply another remarkable *avatar* of divine reality, or whether he is, as he was and will always remain, “the Christ, the Son of the living God”? The church must decide if it has any beliefs and standards of its own on which to stand—and if it does, whether they are firmly enough held to support it—or whether it is so indebted to, determined by, and dependent on culture that it has no soul independent of it.

I wish to be personally transparent on this point. The outcome of the 2008 General Assembly was profoundly distressing to me. The denomination made decisions last summer that, in my judgment, crossed a Rubicon and place us in grave moral and theological jeopardy. Following the General Assembly, my hope and peace fell to a low ebb. What should I do, where should I go? What Christian body will not face the issues, sooner or later, in one form or another, that we are now facing? Is a Biblical understanding of male and female and human sexuality worth contending for? Is a faithful and orthodox Christology worth contending for? Are the people with whom I have stood hand-in-hand on the ramparts of this cause over the decades worthy of my continued support? Above all, if we are in this circumstance because the Lord of the Church is testing and refining his ecclesial bride, should I flee the test or submit to it? The answer to all these questions is clear to me. I must stay at my post, trust God in life and death to honor his call to me, play the part given to me, and take the adventure that comes.

The Discipline of the Protracted Struggle

To us, Jesus repeats the same question he asked the disciples on the way to Caesarea Philippi, “Who do you say that I am?”

Peter answers Jesus dramatically: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” The power of Peter's answer is not simply its truth, but its decisiveness. With that answer, in that place, in that moment of time, Peter identifies Jesus and establishes once and for all the chief confession of the Christian faith. But our answer is different, is it not? Our answer will not be a single, dramatic, conclusive answer. It will not be given in one place, nor probably in one definition or doctrine. Our answer is being required over a longer period of time. We face the discipline of a protracted struggle. Our age thinks in terms of speed and instantaneity, not in terms of long periods of time, and especially not in terms of long commitments. The prospect of a protracted struggle is not appealing—perhaps not even endurable. Few challenges could be harder: to render faithful witness over a long time without guarantee of success, and perhaps even for a losing cause. The protracted struggle is the battle no one wants to fight.

It should be some consolation to remember that the church has had to learn the discipline of the protracted struggle more often than it has been blessed with a slam-dunk victory. The Arian controversy of the fourth century was perhaps the first and best tutor of the protracted struggle. For the better part of a century, the Arians seemed not only to have enlisted the stronger minds and more steadfast hearts, but to have gained the upper hand in the struggle with orthodoxy. Under Julian the Apostate in the 360s, “the world awoke with a groan to find itself Arian,” in the words of Jerome. Or so it seemed. In fact, Arianism had not and would not prevail. The church was facing, rather, a subtle and skilled opponent that would require it to come of age, to develop a new vocabulary and theology that was consistent with the apostolic faith and capable of addressing that faith to the dominant issues of the day. No voices were more important in that struggle than Athanasius and the Cappadocian Fathers. To this day the church is grateful and indebted to them for rising to the challenge.

Your Enemy is Your Best Teacher

We are facing a similarly subtle and skilled opponent—or set of opponents—that require something similar of us. The defining issue is not for us, as it was for the fourth century, the exact relation of Jesus to God, but rather the relation of Jesus to modern Western culture; the relation of male and female and the role of human sexuality in the kingdom of God; the relationship of Jesus Christ and the gospel to other religions. The task

before us is the development of new minds and hearts, a new appropriation of the catechetical offices of the church, to begin the hard work of developing a vocabulary and theology consistent with the apostolic faith, and a capability of addressing that faith to the twenty-first century.

It is a daunting agenda. From a human perspective it seems impossible. Even with God's help it may be nearly impossible. Given the difficulty of the task, the dwindling numbers of our *confreres* in the PCUSA, and the deadlock of the conflict, many voices are calling us to abandon this entrenched struggle, and "get on with the task of missions and evangelism." "The church in the Third World is growing leaps and bounds," we are told, "and could not care less about our struggles with homosexuality or the Trinity. While the PCUSA is caught in a futile little eddy at the side of the river, the torrent of the stream is passing us by with vigor and momentum." It is a compelling argument. But is it true? Or is it, for all its attraction, a Siren's Song? Suppose we quit the field in the PCUSA and plunge into the fruitful fields of mission and evangelism in the Third world. What will we as Western American Christians have to give to the Third World church if we cannot bear a faithful witness in our own culture, in our own day, to our own church? If we abandon the battle in our culture, what do we have to say to them in theirs? Could it be that the battle in our culture is not, in fact, a mere tangent or marginal eddy, but a very significant battle over human sexuality, of the relation of Christ and culture, and of the relation of Christ and other religions, that in time will become the issue with which our brothers and sisters around the globe will themselves need to contend? The West is successfully exporting modernity—including its sins and sicknesses—to the world; it is only a matter of time until our problems become the problems of India and Africa and China. If we cannot speak to these problems in our time and culture, then do we not forfeit our testimony to other points of the globe and to later periods of history?

I wish to conclude with two points. First, let me return to liminality, with which we began. Consider the

differences between early Christian literature produced at the center of the system versus Christian literature produced in liminal regions. Is it not interesting that James and the *Didache*, for example, which were written at the fixed center of Judaism, have predominantly moral understandings of Jesus, with virtually no Christology? By contrast, Ephesians, Corinthians, Colossians, and Romans, all of which were written in the dangerous, no-holds-barred liminal regions where the Judeo-Christian tradition met robust paganism and emperor worship, develop fuller understandings of the redeeming significance of Jesus Christ and the universal scope of the gospel. It was not the safe and secure center, in other words, that led the early church to a proper understanding of its Lord, but only the religious free-for-all of the Hellenistic world. The dangers of secularism and pluralism were necessary for early Christians to discover the profundity and power of the gospel. Their enemy was their best teacher.

Second, let us not predicate our obedience to Christ on the basis of its prospects of success. That is no longer obedience to Christ, but calculated utilitarianism. We do not know what lies before us. We only know that, like the Twelve, we have been called by Jesus to "Follow me." Luther believed when he was called to appear before Cajetan in Augsburg in 1518 that he would, in fact, be killed. He went nevertheless. Bonhoeffer returned to Germany from safety in America in 1939, saying, "I shall have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people." Like Luther, Bonhoeffer too had a premonition of his death. Luther, as it turned out, lived, and effected the most significant reform the Christian church has ever experienced. Bonhoeffer, of course, died, but his witness has been greater in his death than it was in his life. "Whether we live or whether we die, we belong to the Lord" (Rom 14:8). Let us follow Him, and play the part assigned to us.

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The Reformation of the Church: Living the Hosea Life

by Faith Jongewaard

All his friends would have understood if he had left her. She was unfaithful, wandering, adulterous—plain and simple, she was a whore. The children, who all bore his

name, didn't all look very much like him. He was always having to go after her, always having to hunt her down in bars and strip joints and other men's houses. He was

always having to bail her out of some mess or another—and, that wasn't cheap or easy. So, everyone would have understood if he had left her. Some would have even applauded. Some would have said, "Well, it's about time! She's been playing him for a fool for way too long!"

But, he didn't leave her. He couldn't leave her. It wasn't that he didn't get frustrated with her—angry, furious, raging mad. But, he couldn't leave her. He had made a promise—not just to her, but also to God. And, truth be told, it was often only the promise to God that kept him going. He was, he said, being faithful to God, not to her. And that mattered to him more than anything—more than her unfaithfulness, more than the shame he felt about her lifestyle, more than the fantasies (and the advice of well-meaning friends) that he might really have a much better life without her or with another.

What he really hoped was that the friends and neighbors who watched might just get the point he was trying to make with his life, with his faithfulness. He hoped they would think of the God who refused to let them go, the God who searched them out, the God who was always faithful, even when they weren't. He didn't know whether it would turn out that way or not, of course, but he was committed to keeping his promises as a sign of the promise-keeping God. So, he couldn't leave her. He could only continue to love her and keep trying to bring her home.

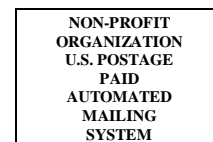
I love that story of Hosea and his relationship to his unfaithful wife Gomer—really, of course, the story of God and God's relationship to God's unfaithful people. I can't help but think it has something to say to us in the PC(USA)—perhaps, especially, to those who might be considering leaving because we seem to have become an unfaithful church.

I, too, have been very concerned in recent years about the direction we may be going. I, too, have grieved over events that seemed to denigrate our Lord Jesus, question his atoning gift for us, re-name God to fit our own ideas. I, too, have been frustrated by what often seems an anything-goes approach to Scripture and a selective

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disregard for the clear meaning of our Constitution and the application of its discipline. I, too, am appalled at the vast amount of time and money—not to mention, words—we have wasted fighting with each other instead of moving into the world with the Good News of the saving work of Jesus Christ for all people everywhere.

But, I will not leave this denomination—and that is not because I am somehow more righteous or faithful than those who might be thinking of leaving. These are my reasons: (1) I have been called by God to serve God in the PC(USA), and I have taken ordination vows to serve God and God's people *in this context*. (2) There is no perfect church out there—every denomination manages to be “unfaithful” or “unseeing” in its own way, I think. So, where would I go? Would, for example, The Evangelical Presbyterian Church welcome me as a woman called by God to ordained ministry? (Only in a “local option” kind of way, I think. How ironic is that?) (3) I have a responsibility to those who cannot leave. I think of the tender compassion of Jesus toward the people who were “like sheep without a shepherd.” Leaving them so that I can be free from hassle or imperfection or doctrinal impurity strikes me as abandoning the “sheep” to the “wolves” who would destroy them. (Hosea, abandoning the children to their unfit mother.) If the denomination is as bad as I sometimes think it is, how can I walk away from these folks?

Like Hosea, like Jesus, we are called to lay down our lives, empty ourselves of our “druthers” and serve the Lord by serving His people where He has placed us. Perhaps, like Hosea, we have been called by God to **stay with** an unfaithful wife, to demonstrate, by our love for her and our service to her, the great love of God for God's people.

This article is reprinted with permission from the on-line *Presbyterian Outlook*, February 13, 2007. It still expresses Rev. Jongewaard's view of the PCUSA.

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