Theology Matters

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Keeping Our Vows
A Pledge of Presbyterian Officers

For thirty years, *Theology Matters* has sought to provide theological insight and reflection on the faith and life of Reformed and Presbyterian Churches around the world. Today, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) faces what might be its greatest challenge yet.

An overture to this year's PC(USA) General Assembly intends to force those of us who are ministers, elders, or deacons in the church to affirm what we do not believe, thus violating our constitutionally protected freedom of conscience as well as the historic doctrines of creation and redemption well-articulated in our confessions.

In response to that, the Board of *Theology Matters* voted unanimously to affirm the following four-point pledge and commend it to all ordained officers of the PC(USA):

1. I pledge to keep my ordination vows and to exercise my office as a minister, elder, or deacon under the authority of Holy Scripture and guided by the confessions adopted by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

2. I pledge to resist all efforts to hinder the exercise of my office as a minister, elder, or deacon under the authority of Holy Scripture and guided by the confessions adopted by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

3. I pledge to stand with those who suffer as a consequence of exercising their office as a minister, elder, or deacon under the authority of Holy Scripture and guided by the confessions adopted by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

4. Under the authority of Holy Scripture and guided by the confessions adopted by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), I regard the requirement to endorse gender identity and all sexual orientations to be a denial of Christian liberty, a contradiction of the doctrines of creation and redemption, and, therefore, a violation of my ordination vows.

If you are a minister, elder, or deacon and also a member of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), we hope and pray that many of you will join us in a public affirmation of, and commitment to, this pledge so that we may all stand together against what the overture seeks to do and for the historic faith and teachings of the Christian church.

To learn more about our pledge to keep our ordination vows and to make that pledge yourself, please go to: https://www.theologymatters.com/articles/church-and-culture/2024/keeping-our-vows-a-pledge-of-presbyterian-officers/ or send your name, city, state, and the office you hold to: Theology Matters P.O. Box 50026 Greenwood, SC 29649 or email us at: admin@theologymatters.com. If you are not a member of the PC(USA), please pray for those who are seeking to bear faithful witness in it.

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What Happened at General Assembly Where Will the Boundaries Be?

By Sara Jane Nixon

Between June 29 and July 4, 2024, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) met in Salt Lake City, Utah, to deliberate on a great number of issues of varying importance to the life of the denomination. Certainly, none has received more attention—not least from this publication—than POL-01, also known as the Olympia Overture, which seemed to threaten the continued existence of biblical orthodoxy in the PC(USA), especially around the issue of gender and sexuality. While what happened is fairly straightforward, what it means for the denomination and for individual congregations is less so.

What Happened

The original overture was split into two parts to allow them to be considered separately. The first part aimed to amend F-1.0403 in the *Book of Order*, titled "Unity in Diversity." That section currently states:

The unity of believers in Christ is reflected in the rich diversity of the Church's membership. In Christ, by the power of the Spirit, God unites persons through baptism regardless of race, ethnicity, age, sex, disability, geography, or theological conviction. There is therefore no place in the life of the Church for discrimination against any person. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) shall guarantee full participation and representation in its worship, governance, and emerging life to all persons or groups within its membership. No member shall be denied participation or representation for any reason other than those stated in this Constitution.

The first part of POL-01 sought to add "gender identity and sexual orientation" to this "non-discrimination" list. This part passed 389 to 24 (94% to 6%), without anyone present speaking against it.

The second part of the overture sought to add teeth to the first part by requiring that every council, as part of its examination of candidates for ordination or installation, inquire into a candidate's willingness to uphold "the principles of participation and representation found in F-1.0403." The overture was further amended to include an examination regarding the "Historic Principles of Church Order" in F-3.01. After some discussion, this part passed 297 to 130 (70% to 30%).

Since the two parts of the overture were discussed and passed separately, both will be sent to the presbyteries for their vote within the next calendar year. If a simple majority of Presbyteries vote to approve them, then they will be incorporated into the PC(USA)'s *Book of Order* and take effect in July 2025. Importantly, all people in ordered ministries in the PC(USA) promise to uphold the polity of the PC(USA)—including, if they pass, these proposed amendments.

What It Means

This leads us immediately to several questions. What does it mean to uphold a non-discrimination policy regarding sexual orientation and gender identity in the life and leadership of the church? What is required by the obligation to ascertain a candidate's ability and willingness to uphold the amended F-1.0403? Does the addition of the "Historic Principles of Church Order" to that obligatory conversation change the calculus at all? We are hearing different answers to these questions, depending upon the speaker and the audience being addressed.

Of these questions, the first is the most important. In fact, the Advisory Committee on the Constitution was at pains to remind commissioners several times during the discussion that this second part of the Olympia Overture is essentially redundant. Due to the vows all ordained officers take, they are required to uphold *all* of the *Book of Order,* whether a particular section is specifically listed or not. For this reason, the addition of the "Historic Principles of Church Order," though intended as a "balancing" measure, *makes absolutely no difference to the question at hand*. The entire second half of POL-01, despite being more aggressive and attention-grabbing on the surface, is far less impactful than the inclusion of "gender identity and sexual orientation" in F-1.0304.

The challenge of opposing part 1 is that no one wants to be branded with the word "discrimination." In fact, many who hold a biblically orthodox view of gender and sexuality are arguing that part 1 is not a problem because they are not discriminating against anyone. They would argue that no one in their churches is turned away from leadership because of the temptations they face but because of how they respond to those temptations—whether their temptations are sexual in nature or not. The Bible demands a great deal of those called to be

leaders of the Lord's Church. The truth of this logic is irrelevant: engaging in semantic arguments over the meaning of "discrimination" will not help us. The important thing is what a council or a permanent judicial commission would consider discrimination. For example, will it believe that asking all ordained officers to be faithful in heterosexual marriage or chaste outside of marriage is discrimination? *If past judicial precedent is an indicator, it seems likely that the answer is yes.*

Many people are telling us that nothing has happened and that all this amendment requires is a conversation. During every examination, the question must be asked, are you willing and able to promise that you will strive to ensure that people of all ages, all races, both sexes, all gender identities, all sexual orientations, etc., have full access to the life and leadership of the church? These voices tell us that no particular answer is required and that the candidate will have equal freedom to answer "Yes" or "No." They remind us that it is then the council's job to determine whether or not the candidate's answers are acceptable. In that sense, the "local option," the ability of a council to choose its own leaders, remains intact, even if both parts of POL-01 become enshrined in our constitution. A presbytery, or, for that matter, a congregation, has always had the authority to reject a candidate for ordination for any number of reasons, both good and bad.

However, that is not to say that nothing has changed. What will be different if POL-01 passes is not so much a matter of what is forbidden or allowed. Rather, the PC(USA) will have a different standard by which what is acceptable is measured. Over the last decades, the normative view of sexuality has shifted away from the traditionally orthodox understanding to a decade where different views have been held more or less equally. Now, we are coming to a new understanding: one where open and affirming views of gender identity and sexual orientation are the norm, and biblically orthodox views are a departure that must be discussed and, potentially, accepted as a departure from that norm—or not.

In short, to say that nothing has changed is misleading. Certainly, something has changed. POL-01, as originally proposed, seemed intended to curtail the voice and influence of those who hold biblically orthodox views of human sexuality. And while the assembly may have meant to soften the original proposal, it remains to be seen how the text will be read and interpreted by Presbyterians in the future, particularly in the judicial process.

If POL-01 passes in a majority of the presbyteries, at the very least the traditional understanding of gender and sexuality will have been moved farther to the sidelines, farther outside the realm of mainstream and acceptable viewpoints held by PC(USA) officers. At most, the groundwork will have been laid to take it off the table entirely. What counts as discrimination? How long will what is essentially a scruple regarding gender identity and sexual orientation remain acceptable? When we look at the "non-discrimination" list already present in the *Book of Order*, we see that, in most cases, it is not acceptable for a candidate to express hesitation about them. For example, the famous result of the Kenyon case is that it is not permitted for an officer of the PC(USA) to be opposed to the ordination of women. Certainly the same holds true for many of the other categories on that list. How will these new categories be understood? We may not know until these questions are tried in the church courts.

What You Can Do

It cannot be said enough: the most important thing we can do is pray. Whatever happens, Jesus Christ remains the Lord of his Church and the Shepherd of his flock. Pray for your congregation, your leaders, and your presbytery. Pray for unity, peace, and an increase in holiness and love for the Kingdom of God. Friends outside the PC(USA) may also join with us in prayer.

Second, we can speak up. Not all of us will have voice, let alone vote, at the presbytery meetings. However, we can speak supportively and lovingly to those who do. We can encourage them to speak and vote according to the truth. Whether they themselves hold orthodox views of sexuality or not, many understand that these measures do not include anyone who was previously excluded, may well lead to the exclusion of those previously included, elevate one issue over many more important issues, and certainly do not further the peace, unity, or purity of the church. And if you are an ordained officer of the PC(USA), you can make your commitment public by signing Theology Matters' pledge: Keeping Our Vows: https://www.theologymatters.com/articles/church-and-culture/2024/keeping-our-vows-a-pledge-of-presbyterian-officers/

Finally, we can speak, vote, and pray to preserve a place for what we perceive to be the will of God for human beings without falling into a spirit of fear, bitterness, or anxiety. Our Lord, who holds all things in his hand, has already promised us that the gates of Hell will not prevail against his Church. These discussions matter deeply, but in the end, the salvation of the church is not our burden to bear. 2 Timothy 1:7 reminds us, "For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love, and self-discipline." The passage continues:

> He has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our

Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel (2 Tim. 1:9–10) [NIV]

Let's live and work for his pleasure alone.

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Shall God Alone Remain Lord of the Conscience?

by James C. Goodloe IV

For centuries, Presbyterian Churches have believed and understood that the Christian liberty which Jesus Christ purchased for us by his undeserved but willing death on the cross includes the freedom of conscience. This is affirmed in the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647) with unmistakable clarity:

> *God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it in matters of faith or worship.* So that to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commandments out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience; and the requiring an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also.[1]

In fact, freedom of conscience has been so important that this entire first sentence, even its often neglected second half, is also included in the current *Book of Order* of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).[2] That is good. But now it is under attack.

The General Assembly of the PC(USA), at its meeting in 2024, received an overture from the Olympia Presbytery, "On Amending the *Book of Order* to Include Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Among the Categories Against Which This Church Does Not Discriminate." The overture was designated as POL-01, approved by the Assembly, and sent to the presbyteries for their consideration for amending the *Book of Order*. But two problems immediately arise.

By way of background, the church has long understood the Bible to be the written form of the Word of God, so it is primary among written authorities for the faith and life of the church. The historic creeds, catechisms, and confessions of faith are secondary authorities, intended to summarize the teachings of the Bible on major matters of doctrine such as the Trinity, creation, providence, the incarnation, salvation, sanctification, resurrection, and so forth. The PC(USA) has gathered several of these documents into its *Book of Confessions*, which is Part I of the denomination's Constitution. The *Book of Order* intends to apply the teachings of the Bible and the confessions to the practical concerns of the day to day life of the church. This statement of polity is Part II of the Constitution, and as such it is a third-level authority.

The Bible, of course, is not subject to revision, though the church rightly always seeks better translations and understanding of it. The *Book of Confessions* can be revised, either by amendment of an historical document or documents, by deletion of an historical document or documents, or by addition of another document or documents, either historical or contemporary. But the process of revision is intentionally difficult, requiring approval by a super-majority of presbyteries, so as to build a significant amount of stability into Part I of the Constitution. For this reason, revisions to it are seldom attempted. By way of contrast, the *Book of Order* can be revised more easily, by a simple majority of presbyteries, as is appropriate for a practical document having to do with worship, mission, education, and the ordering of the life and work of congregations, presbyteries, synods, and the general assembly.

Therefore, for several decades, those intent upon changing both the faith and the life of the PC(USA) have been content with making only a few amendments to the *Book of Confessions*, but they have succeeded in having two complete rewrites of the *Book of Order* and in making numerous amendments to it. One profound problem has been that several of these amendments stand in direct contradiction to the Bible and the *Book of*

Confessions. This gets everything backward, putting the *Book of Order* into the position of the highest authority in the faith and life of the church, which it was never meant to be.[3] And things are about to get worse.

First, proposed amendment POL-01 intends to insert into the *Book of Order*, in a list of categories of persons against whom the church shall not discriminate (F-1.0403), the categories of "sexual orientation" and "gender identity." But there is not a word about either of these in the Bible. Moreover, there is not a word about either of these in the *Book of Confessions*. To introduce these novel categories into the *Book of Order* would be knowingly and willingly to amend it yet again into direct contradiction with both the Bible and the *Book of Confessions*, despite their stated higher authority.

Second, proposed amendment POL-01 also intends to insert into the *Book of Order*, in a list of standards for ordained service in the church (G-2.0104b), a requirement that every session and presbytery, in its consideration of persons for ordination and/or installation into any office, examine each candidate's "commitment to fulfill" all requirements for non-discrimination included in the newly amended section F-1.0403, as described in the previous paragraph.

But surely, taken together, these two amendments would violate the freedom of conscience of any candidate or officer who disagrees with them. These two categories of "sexual orientation" and "gender identity" are "contrary" to the Word of God or "beside it." And the requirement that each candidate or officer honor these categories is a "commandment" of men from which God has left the conscience free.

To be perfectly clear, it is not only future ordinations that would be blocked. Even if you are already a deacon, an elder, or a minister in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), this proposed amendment to the *Book of Order* may affect whether you can or will ever again be installed to active service in that office. If you are a member of a congregation of the PC(USA), this proposed amendment may affect who can be installed to the board of deacons, the session, or as a pastor of the congregation. Consider this very carefully.

So far, for the most part, the PC(USA) has been willing to allow its deacons, elders, and ministers to exercise their "freedom of conscience" in regard to their interpretation of Scripture, to the extent that could be done "without serious departure" from "the essentials of the Reformed faith and polity." For example, denying the Trinity, the incarnation, salvation, or the resurrection would be a serious departure and would be grounds for withholding ordination and/or installation from that person. Conversely, freedom has been allowed in choosing how many elders to have, when in the worship service to receive the offering, and so forth. But now, an effort is underway to slam the door shut on "freedom of conscience." Elevating the approval of the two categories of "sexual orientation" and "gender identity" to be required and essential to holding office changes everything. Anyone who does not approve could be excluded from office. That is not good.

Theology Matters intends to uphold the historic primary authority of the Scripture, the secondary authority of the confessions, and the tertiary authority of our polity. *Theology Matters* intends to uphold our obedience to our ordination vows, which articulate clearly this order of authority. *Theology Matters* intends to resist the ongoing efforts knowingly and willingly to amend the *Book of Order* into direct contradiction with the Scripture and the *Book of Confessions*, realizing that such anti-confessionalism leads us into post-constitutionalism and government by mere majority, otherwise known as mob rule. *Theology Matters* intends to stand with, and to support, any who suffer as a result of obedience to our ordination vows. And we invite you to join us in this effort.

To learn more about our pledge to keep our ordination vows and to make that pledge yourself, please go to: https://www.theologymatters.com/articles/church-and-culture/2024/keeping-our-vows-a-pledge-of-presbyterian-officers/

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[1] *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part I: Book of Confessions* (The Office of the General Assembly: Louisville, KY, 2010), 171, paragraph 6.109, emphasis added.
[2] *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part II: Book of Order 2023–2025* (The Office of the General Assembly: Louisville, KY, 2023), 11, paragraph F-3.0101.
[3] For more information about the particulars of such amendments and rulings and about their setting within the historical faith and governance of the church, see James C. Goodloe IV, "John Calvin on the Unity and Truthfulness of the Church." *Theology Matters* 22.1 (Spring 2016): 1–10. https://www.theologymatters.com/articles/reformation-of-the-church/2016/john-calvin-on-the-unity-and-truthfulness-of-the-church/

Preparing to Vote on the Amendments

by Jerry Andrews

Background

At my last installation as a pastor, my father, a ruling elder, prayed that God would make me "wise as a serpent and innocent as a dove." No one was better positioned to know my need: "make" was his verb. Only at my best was I both; too often just one; at times not much of either. In my call as a presbyter in the PC(USA) being both has been required. So, it is now when preparing to vote on two proposed amendments.

Here is the exact wording of both amendments, with the new proposed amendments in bold.

Shall F-1.0403 be amended as follows:

> The unity of believers in Christ is reflected in the rich diversity of the Church's membership. In Christ, by the power of the Spirit, God unites persons through baptism, regardless of race, ethnicity, age, sex, **gender identity, sexual orientation**, disability, geography, or theological conviction. There is therefore no place in the life of the Church for discrimination against any person. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) shall guarantee full participation and representation in its worship, governance, and emerging life to all persons or groups within its membership. No member shall be denied participation or representation for any reason other than those stated in this Constitution.

Shall G-2.0104b be amended as follows:

> Standards for ordained service reflect the church's desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life (F-1.02). The council responsible for ordination and/or installation (G-2.0402; G-2.0607; G-3.0306) shall examine each candidate's calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability for the responsibilities of ordered ministry. The examination shall include, but not be limited to, a determination of the candidate's ability and commitment to fulfill all requirements as expressed in the constitutional questions for ordination and installation (W-4.0404) and in the Historic Principles of Church Order F-3.01, **and in the principles of participation and representation, found in F-1.0403**. Councils shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates.

These proposed amendments originated in the Presbytery of Olympia, which, it says, was troubled by difficulties in examining candidates for ordination and sent an overture to the General Assembly to help ease its troubles. I think the amendments will not resolve their troubles but will instead cause troubles for many others in the church. So, too, do others.

The Presbytery had found the answers of candidates to questions regarding gender identity and sexual orientation to be unsatisfactory because the candidates affirmed the traditional view of marriage. The Presbytery judged this conviction to be discriminatory, and the decision was made, therefore, not to ordain. The overture proposed by the Presbytery asked the General Assembly both to add "gender identity" and "sexual orientation" to the list of those persons against whom the church will not discriminate and to add a mandate that every session and every presbytery now examine every candidate for every office of the church every time on matters of gender identity and sexual orientation. No particular questions or answers are mandated; the examination is required. The implication of this is clear and, in Olympia Presbytery, in practice already. Whatever the questions may be, if the candidate affirms the traditional view of marriage, that answer may be judged to be discriminatory, and the candidate denied ordination.

I see neither innocence nor wisdom is this.

The two proposed amendments now come to the presbyteries for their ratification or rejection. Votes will be taken between now and next July.

The following is written in hopes of helping presbyters prepare for their vote by offering some thoughts and considerations which they may wish to offer to their congregations and presbyteries.

In this we will do well to find other near-by presbyters —right, left, and center—who share our misgivings and opposition and to make common cause. It is worth noting that some of the strongest voices of opposition before, during, and after the General Assembly in July were those committed to the full inclusion of sexual minorities—identity and orientation.

Congregations

The Constitution has long required that an examination be conducted prior to installation by both presbytery and session. In the practice of the church these examinations vary widely, especially by sessions, but are mandated to ask the constitutional questions and hear the constituted answers. The new mandate requires an examination without prescribed questions or answers of all candidates for the office of deacon or elder in your congregation. The constitutional questions for ordination are specific, so, too, are the expected prescribed answers. The new inquiry is absent this. Less troublesome would be the question: "Do you pledge to abstain from discrimination against any baptized member?"

This will be philosophically and practically troubling in congregations that are "blue," that is, progressive and liberal. This new mandate is, at the least, most illiberal, thus violating their liberal vision and hopes for the church. Many progressives and liberals have spoken on how this mandate wars against their work in the church to make it more inclusive. Tolerance and diversity will be diminished thereby. Only those affirming a progressive opinion on matters of sexuality may be affirmed. Gone is the "big tent" with its wide welcome; it will be problematic, indeed, impossible, within their congregations.

This will be potentially and probably troubling in our congregations that are "purple," that is, equally open to those who affirm either a progressive or a traditional view of marriage, and those who are committed to neither. Each elder and deacon elected by the congregation, when examined by the session, may be required to affirm a progressive view on matters of gender identity and sexual orientation or be denied ordination. The half of the membership that cannot so affirm will then be denied the offices of the church. Pastors in purple congregations are troubled at the prospect of this exclusion. Purple will become a color of the past; they must operate as if blue, exclusively and absolutely.

This will be profoundly problematic for congregations that are "red," that is, traditional, conservative, or evangelical. No longer can they encourage those under their care to seek ordination in the PC(USA). It will, as a matter of constitutional mandate, be denied them. Their next pastor called by the congregation from another presbytery will be denied installation. The pool of elders and deacons within the congregation will be eliminated. The congregation may neither raise nor have its chosen leadership. It is unclear how, with a good conscience, it is imagined these congregations go forward in the PC(USA). Maybe it is imagined and intended they do not.

For this reason alone—the necessarily narrowing and intentionally prohibitive restriction it places on our congregations—this amendment should be denied. We will be both wise and innocent by remembering the real and desired breadth of Christ's church, and the life and leadership of all our congregations.

Discrimination

"Discrimination" is defined in the dictionary first as "discern," "differentiate," or "distinguish." This is precisely what we presbyters are required to do when examining candidates for office. It is a good thing. But it is its second dictionary meaning that is rightly the concern—"to decide categorically rather individually" or "to make a difference in treatment or favor on a basis other than merit." This is a bad thing. For example, we discriminate when we examine a candidate for ordination to the ministry of Word and Sacrament about his or her academic preparation, gifts and ability for ministry, sense of call, Christian experience, etc. But we do not examine candidates about immutable characteristics of their nature or background. Why? Because "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). The *Book of Order* thus reads: "There is therefore no place in the life of the church for discrimination against any person." Exactly right. To do so is a denial of the Gospel.

The first amendment proposes to add to the listed categories of "persons" against which there is to be no discrimination of this second sort "gender identity" and "sexual orientation." Though it is not my instinct to have such a list at all, the church has been accustomed to name the categories of persons against which there has been discrimination. Nor do I think it wise to continue to add to the list additional categories. Is this itself not the categorizing we want so much to end? And, because the named list is constitutionally treated as an exhaustive not representative list, does it not call attention to who is not on the list? It is better, I think, to eliminate the sentence entirely. Sufficiently challenging and commanding, inspirational and aspirational, would be the remainder of a now clearer and more potent, and wiser and more innocent paragraph:

> The unity of believers in Christ is reflected in the rich diversity of the Church's membership. In Christ, by the power of the Spirit, God unites persons through baptism. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) shall guarantee full participation and representation in its worship, governance, and emerging life to all persons or groups within its membership. No member shall be denied participation or representation for any reason other than those stated in this Constitution.

That possibility is not now before us, only adding to the current list. To be clear, it is not right and ought not to be permitted to discriminate against persons. And it is worth remembering that our personhood is defined by Jesus Christ—not by who we think we are, but by who we are "in Christ."

Détente

After a long generation of division on matters that highlighted sexuality the church decided, in the hopes of ending such division, to include and recognize both traditional and progressive views regarding sexuality, and thus specifically changing ordination standards and re-defining marriage. While differences in convictions would continue, no one was to be excluded for holding and articulating their convictions. It was determined that individual conscience trumped ecclesial uniformity.

Holding evangelical convictions as I do, this decision was, I admit, not of my choosing. But the church having made the decision, I chose to live in this détente. So, too, did the majority of evangelicals and those of traditional convictions. We "re-upped." There was room and right for us.

We determined to be friends with all our colleagues in ministry and to make our contribution to the whole—the emphases of getting the Gospel right (the theological mission), getting the Gospel out (the evangelistic mission), and getting the Gospel within (the formational mission).

We heard the often-articulated argument that this decision of détente on matters of sexuality was like what the church had done on race and gender. This was heard as a threat then; a threat now looming in these proposed amendments. It is noted that what was once prohibited —people of color from congregations and women from office—when permitted, eventually becomes prescribed. When the standards of office and definition of marriage changed, hundreds of congregations left to avoid the prescription of one opinion and practice such as is in the proposed mandate. Many left the PC(USA), anticipating that the day would soon come when a progressive view alone would be required. Smart money was on ten years. That was ten years ago.

Again, we re-upped, trusting the church would be at its best by keeping its commitment to all. And we re-upped striving to be at our best for the sake of all.

An attempt at something like these amendments may have been inevitable but their approval is not. To be clear, the second amendment removes, in no uncertain terms, the room for all provided in the détente by its new requirement. When the church opened to a progressive view of sexuality matters, promises were made by its proponents not to do what this amendment attempts to do. We keep our commitment to the whole; we ask the whole to keep its commitment to us. Many progressives and liberals also are articulating their continued commitment to a wide church and thus their opposition to the new mandate.

The argument and hope of the détente was for a new breadth in the church; a freedom to call it as you see it and to act, accordingly; a commitment to give respect for the conscience of others on these matters. In our engagements we would practice persuasion without coercion; a recognition that these matters were important, even very important, but that we could still live and serve together in the same fold despite our differences over these matters. We began to practice a high commitment to mutual forbearance.

There was a compromise in this détente formed a decade ago. Some wanted a more obvious justice that required a new uniformity of action; some wanted a more obvious truth that required a return to a traditional uniformity of confession. This was and is, to be sure, an uneasy truce. But what is apparent is that we lived together in this détente. Differences among us persist, but some basic form of common life remains. There is no wisdom or innocence in dismantling the détente.

Vocabulary Matters

It is not clear who are the category of persons denoted by "gender identity." The public discussions I overhear, left and right, tend to appall and do little to enlighten. Placing the phrase "gender identity" between "sex" and "sexual orientation" in the constitutional wording may be intended to clarify but it does not help my understanding. Again, it is better, I think, to say "God unites persons through baptism" than to list (at the exclusion of others) some, but only some, categories.

The phrases "sexual orientation" and "gender identity" have not been defined. There is no consensus in public discourse, much less in academic or scientific circles, about what these terms mean. Their referents are already broad and will almost certainly continue to broaden. Asking the *Book of Order*, candidates for ordination, or ordaining bodies to keep up may be a rigor in excess of the value gained.

"Theological conviction" finishes the constitutional list. It may be the most troubling because discernment on theological matters is it at the heart of examination of officers. Though the phrase is imprecise, it can be argued it may be the one that protects me from discrimination. To hold a traditional view of marriage is not discrimination but theological conviction, a

conviction based on an understanding of Scripture and the priority of Scripture in these matters. The church is committed to a breadth of theological convictions that includes this. The new mandate undermines that commitment.

Let me illustrate. In matters of discrimination generally, I think the best starting point for the church's reflection is: "*God created humanity in his own image, in the image of God created he them*" (Gen. 1:27), which continues through Jesus declaring "*for God so loved the world*" (John 3:16). In matters of "gender identity," I think the best starting point is: *"in the image of God created he them; male and female created he them* (Gen. 1:27) and continues through Paul writing: "*neither male nor female*" (Gal. 3:28). In matters of "sexual orientation," I think the best starting place is: "*a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh*,"(Gen. 2:24) and continues through our Savior reaffirming this saying: "*Haven't you read that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female' and said 'For this reason a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh'"* (Mark 10:6-8).

I hold this theological conviction. Accordingly, I do not officiate at same-gender weddings. That this is a theological conviction does not make me right, not nearly, but it makes excluding me for thinking this, and for acting accordingly, a violation of the Constitution's non-discrimination provision not just the détente. Others think differently than I on these matters and accordingly act differently.

For more than a decade, the PC(USA) has not required uniformity of views on sexual matters nor permitted exclusion based on conviction. This amendment encourages an exclusion by requiring an environment of examination on the matter. This unprecedented attempt in this proposed mandate is not a reversal of wills with a reversal of majorities; this amendment is a will to do what the church has always known not to do.

Examination Matters

The Constitution now calls for councils—presbyteries and sessions—responsible for ordinations and installations to examine and determine "each candidate's calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability for the responsibilities of ordered ministry" and is specific only in including "the candidate's ability and commitment to fulfill all requirements as expressed in the constitutional questions …" These are expressed constitutional questions with expressed answers. These, and only these, are named as requiring the examiners' "determination." Of the hundreds of provisions of the *Book of Confessions* and *Book of Order*, this amendment proposes to add the newly amended paragraph about discrimination to the requirement. It lifts the proposed amended paragraph to the same level as the constitutional questions. Every candidate, every transferring pastor into every presbytery, every officer-elect within the congregation, every time, is to be examined on the discrimination clause.

Do you want your session to be required to query every candidate for office every time on matters of discrimination? Do you want your presbytery to be similarly required? If you want to examine a candidate on this specific matter you may do so now at any time. Do you want to be required to do it every time?

The intention is to exclude, if not to silence and to deter, those who hold traditional views from the offices of the church. The logic employed is something like this: To disagree with a person is to fail to affirm the person and thus to discriminate against that person—to *disagree* is to *discriminate against*. This is not so and should not be allowed to be considered constitutionally so. Parents know better, friends know better, the church knows better. To disagree with another and yet hold the other dear and near may be an act of love, and is best characterized as for, not against, the person.

There is a context for this attempted overreach—the violence in our world against sexual minorities and the suicide rates of young people struggling with their sexual identity. To acknowledge these is to become angry. To hold accountable for this, and thus to make the objects of a newly weaponized constitution, those whose theological convictions are traditional is to misdirect the anger. It accomplishes no new protection; no one is safer for the intended and enforced exclusion. The anger of the righteous does not accomplish the righteousness of God (James 1:20).

One of the rationales given by the presbytery for their overture is that studies show that the children of religious parents who have "negative views on being LGBTQIA+ have higher rates of suicide attempts." My experiences of conservative parents, my own being as conservative as any I have known, an experience shared with my sister and the twenty-two foster children with whom we were raised, is that the traditional values of our parents protected us and convinced us of their and God's love for us.

The rationale claims that if the amendment is passed, on this matter of children, "justice will be served." I think not. Re-constituting on what basis candidates are examined holds no promise of help within our families. This is a miss.

Ecclesial Matters

The whole attempt is a miss. I have yet to hear from any colleague in ministry—a member of a minority race or ethnicity, a woman, an older person, someone with disabilities—that they have experienced a new openness to them from calling bodies because the categories against which there is to be no discrimination includes "race," "ethnicity," "age," "sex," "disability." Work, much work, is yet to be done. Adding categories to the list has not done it and will not do it.

The whole attempt has another target. Those who disagree with a progressive view of sexuality—identity and orientation—are clearly aimed at. The overture, almost certainly, will hit these target(s). Can one be forgiven for presuming that what everyone knows—the ineffectiveness of legislation on changing long held theological convictions—is known also to those who advance this amendment? And that what will surely result is not the new inclusion of some, but the success of excluding others—those with traditional theological convictions? And knowing this, this aim is the aim?

Knowing this, many progressive and liberal presbyters oppose this attempt and this overture. This is not the church for which they labored long and pray they have recently fashioned. This is not the broadening church they have loved.

Knowing this, evangelical and conservative presbyters oppose this attempt. While the church has broadened, we want to help it deepen with our theological mission, expand with our evangelistic mission, strengthen with our formational mission. These are Gospel helps we cannot give if our leaders and our congregations are constitutionally targeted for exclusion.

This is a challenge to a church that determines to be and takes pride in being liberal to be truly liberal.

This is a challenge to all who wonder who in their right mind would put this disparate people together in one ecclesial communion, indeed in one confession and polity. The answer, it seems to be, is *God*. And if God then in God's providence; if in God's providence then for God's purposes; and if so, knowing and committing to those purposes is required of us, together. Together we respond.

Many—traditional and progressive alike—immediately have recognized the sad irony of a purported attempt to include all having only the effect to exclude some. It is my hope and that of others that the presbyteries will recognize and reject this amendment. Efforts by those holding traditional and progressive views are coordinating to encourage the presbyteries to decline the new dividing mandate. The church we say we are and want to be is better shown in these responsive joint efforts than in the intention and sure effect of the amendment.

Final Matters

The first part of the amendment requires us to add to the non-discrimination commitments of the church "gender identity" and "sexual orientation." The second part of the amendment puts the commitment to non-discrimination at risk. Presbyters are being asked to add to the requirements of ordination, with "shall" language, that every candidate in every presbytery, every transferring pastor into every presbytery, every officer-elect within every congregation, every time, be examined on the non-discrimination clause.

Not since the Fundamentalists a hundred years ago has any part of the church, a General Assembly included, asked the whole church to add to the requirements for office an examination on selected matters, however important the matter may have seemed at the time.

This new mandate of the second part adds nothing to our commitment to anti-discrimination. For those who argue it gives the commitment "teeth," I argue there has been enough biting. Let us not start again. It will not add to the rich diversity we have in Christ. It may very well newly exclude many. Let us not set that in motion.

Our Call Was Extended by Christ

For many readers of *Theology Matters*, like me, when our efforts failed to call the PC(USA) to affirm what we believe to be Biblical admonitions concerning sexuality and their implications for ordination standards and marriage, some of us determined that to be a continuing witness within the PC(USA) remained a divine call. We determined to lead not leave. This determination is now, again, tested.

I hope and pray we remember that our call in and to the church was not extended by the church itself but by its Savior. Our call was extended by Christ, not the PC(USA). The ordination vows we took were made to Christ and in the name of Christ. Christ's welcome, indeed, the Spirit's inclusion of us, is not dependent on whatever welcome some in the church offer, however sincerely. Nor is it retracted or rescinded by whatever systematic exclusion is attempted.

Our call was extended by Christ.

So too was theirs.

These two truths will be hard to remember while this amendment aims at us. But that is part of the call. Though we would prefer all our rejections be only

external to the church, we have never known it to be otherwise. The PC(USA) has never felt more than now like the church that ordained me forty-five years ago over the voiced objections at my presbytery examination, noting that, because of my home church and the schools of my choosing, I would be schismatic, leading congregations out of the fellowship. Detroit Presbytery judged differently. I remain grateful and called of Christ.

The charge of bigotry at the heart of the accusation of discrimination is hard to bear. The sin is shameful; the implication of it against us is as saddening as it is maddening. The best response is to be innocent of it. Be as loving as is Christ who touches, embraces, and heals in the church now as he did in ancient Israel. This is always the commandment. It is always hard.

Let me offer an additional and difficult challenge. Those who oppose us and our convictions are not "the enemy" who attempts to take something precious away from us —a place of and space for ministry within the PC(USA) —and so we may be tempted to hold on to our stations ever more dearly. Instead, they who oppose us are the precious thing the enemy of the church attempts to take away from us and, thus, we are best advised to hold on ever more dearly to them. They may label us enemy and attempt to eliminate us; we may not. Even if in our lowest self-preserving moments, we can do no better than to consider them with the same disdain they have for us, and think them the enemy, we must remember that the Bible teaches us to have only two responses to our enemies—love them and pray for them. This is us at our best—innocent and wise. Few commitments are more Christ-like. I will ask for God's grace to remember this. Even now. You?

In this season we will hold on tight to those whose convictions we share and to those who are willing to hold on tight to us with shared efforts to turn aside that which divides us, and we will affirm the Savior of the church who has called us all, together, for his sake.

Jerry Andrews is Senior Pastor Emeritus of the First Presbyterian Church, San Diego, California, and serves as a Director on the Board of Theology Matters

The Foundation of Our Calling

By Richard E. Burnett

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints who are also faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace which he lavished upon us. For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In him, according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will, we who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of his glory (Eph. 1:1–12, RSV).

"*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God*." Four times in the first eleven verses of this passage the apostle Paul refers to the will of God. Clearly, the will of God is an important concept to him. In fact, he introduces himself with this phrase in First & Second Corinthians, and Colossians. It also appears in Second Timothy. Paul introduces himself as "*an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God*."

But why does Paul introduce himself so often as "*an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God*"? You probably know there were some who questioned his calling—who not only doubted but disputed, openly, his calling as an apostle. They did not think he should be ranked as an apostle. And on occasion Paul felt compelled to defend his calling as an apostle such as in his Letter to the Galatians. Yet there were other occasions when Paul seems reluctant to defend his calling as an apostle such as in First Corinthians 15 where he says: "*For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain*" (9–10).

So, Paul had his struggles with others about his calling. Yet there are indications that Paul's struggles were not merely from without but also from within. Three times he relates his conversion and call, and each time with a sense of astonishment. Like Moses, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Elijah, Jonah, Amos, and so many others in the Bible, it didn't seem quite right. It didn't seem entirely appropriate. It didn't seem as if he was the right man for the job. It did not seem to make sense on every level.

Acts 9:1 says Saul was "*breathing threats and murder against the disciples*." So, how could one who hated the apostles become an apostle? How could one who persecuted the church become a leader of the church?

Being called by Christ Jesus did not make sense to Paul in many respects. Nor did it make his life easier. In many ways, it made his life more difficult. It did not make everything simple. It made some things more complex. It surely did not reduce the number of questions he had. It only increased them. It certainly did not resolve all his problems. Rather, it exposed problems he did not know he had, and one basic problem in particular about which he said: "*I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate*" and "*I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. … Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?*" (Rom. 7: 15-24, sel.)

Being called by Christ Jesus did not make Paul more understandable to himself in every respect. In some respects, it made him far less understandable to himself: "*I know a man who fourteen years ago was caught up into the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know. God knows*" (2 Cor. 12:2). Then there are all these "*I, not I*" statements in Paul. All of this is quite odd from a strictly psychological standpoint. Suffice it to say, Christ's calling made life infinitely more mysterious yet also infinitely more purposeful and providential, which is likely one reason he referred to himself as "*an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God*." No other explanation sufficed. No other seemed credible except "*the will of God*."

Perhaps this is something worthy of our reflection. I have not yet had the opportunity to get to know many of you. But I know few seminary students who have not struggled with their calling. Perhaps you, too, have had or are having struggles with your calling—and perhaps both from within and without. If so, you are not alone. And you are by no means the first. Many if not most seminary students and students of theology throughout the centuries have struggled with their calling, especially those who have taken it seriously.

Seminary can be a wonderful place to sort these things out. The word seminary derives from the Latin word for "seed." So, seminary suggests a place where tender little seedlings are fed, watered, and nurtured. And I hope this is part of your experience here. But seminary is also a place where our faith is tested. And seminary, in this respect, as many of you have probably figured out already, can be a difficult place, too. And there is no use any of us sugar-coating it or putting the shine on it.

What we learn here does not necessarily make life easier, but sometimes more difficult. It does not necessarily make life simpler, but sometimes makes it more complex. It certainly does not reduce the number of questions one has but only increases them.

There are many reasons for this—both internal and external. But the main reason is *God*. God complicates everything and yet often, at the same time, simplifies everything, too. God, on the one hand, the church teaches, is simple in the sense that he is one, indivisible, and entirely self-consistent. But, on the other hand, God is not simple in the sense that he is easy to understand. He is not easy to understand. He is infinitely complex, mysterious, and difficult to understand.

In many respects, seminary would be so much easier and simpler, if it did not include the study of God. In fact, some seminaries in recent decades have tried to put less emphasis on studying God. It does not appear to have worked out too well in any cases that I know. But I understand the problem: Studying God can often make life so much more difficult and complex.

Let's be honest: Studying theology can be hard—hard on us psychologically and spiritually, personally as well as interpersonally. Studying theology often changes us. We can find out more about ourselves than we ever wanted to know. We can discover more problems than we ever knew we had. Yet we can learn more about God than we could ever dream, which is why Jesus compares knowledge of God to "the pearl of great price" (Matt. 13:45–46)—it is worth selling everything we have.

Nothing can compare with knowing God. Nothing is more beautiful than the beauty of God. Nothing is greater, more glorious, or majestic than the being and acts of God. Listen, again, to what Paul says: "*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing*." "*… the riches of his grace which he lavished upon us. For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth*." Do you know anything more important or worth

studying than this? There is no greater privilege, no greater joy than to inquire in the temple of the Lord (Ps. 27:4). Nevertheless, studying God is not easy.

In the days ahead, you may well be tempted to think, "Maybe I should have studied something else." "Maybe I should have studied botany." Botany is a wonderful field. You look at plants all day under a microscope and discover all sorts of beauty and intricacy. The same thing goes for bugs, I suppose. At the end of the day, you put the plant or the bug back in the bottle or behind the glass, whether dead or alive, it doesn't matter. They all more or less stay put. You go home. You sleep well.

But studying God is not like that. God does not stay put. He does not stay in a bottle or behind glass. A god that stayed in the bottle would not be God. A god that could be captured in a test-tube would not be the God of the Bible because the God of the Bible is free, sovereignly free. A god that could be observed under a microscope would not be the God of the Bible because the God of the Bible is not passive, but active, supremely active, free, and on the move. He goes home with us. He follows us. He pursues us even in our dreams.

Studying God is not safe. It is anything but safe. It is actually quite dangerous. It is like contracting malaria. It can be rough. And once it gets in the blood, you have it for life. And it can reassert itself in very inconvenient moments. Studying theology is often like trying to wire a house with the electricity on. Sooner or later, it's going to bite you, but you never know when or where. Wrestling with God isn't easy. You may end-up like Jacob, limping. And perhaps limping not just a little, but a lot. And perhaps for a longtime. Are you limping? You are not alone. Studying God, wrestling with God, being called by God is not always easy. That is why you and I need to be clear about the foundation of our calling.

The foundation of our calling is not that our momma or somebody else told us we would make a good minister. The foundation of our calling is not the result of some vocational aptitude test or because you, I, or others came to the conclusion we were especially suited, gifted, talented, or had the right disposition, experiences, or skill set. These may play a role and contribute to the fulfillment of our calling, but they are not the foundation of our calling. The foundation of our calling is the will of God.

There is no substitute for knowing that your life is part of a larger story, a grander plan, and that your gifts, talents, abilities, and interests have been given to you for a larger purpose, and that you are not here by accident. You are here by the will of God. And knowing you have been called by the will of God will sustain you and give you strength and courage like nothing else.

And lest anyone here say, "I'm not planning to enter the ministry, so I'm off the hook." Let me say: You, too, are most definitely on the hook because no one comes to know Jesus in the Bible without being given something to do. Have you noticed that? Jesus gives most everyone he meets something to do. Everyone who receives him receives a call. So, the Christian life is not only about justification and sanctification. It is also about *vocation*.

Ministers of the Word, of course, are not the only ones called. *All* Christians are called. *All* have a vocation. Some *are* called to study bugs, botany, or biology. Christians in these callings—and in so many others—have their challenges and pressures, too, which are often far greater than many of us preachers realize. Christians in these callings need also to know that the foundation of their calling is the will of God, that God has given them gifts, talents, and abilities to use in the work of his kingdom, and that they too are part of God's story and grand plan. They too are part of a great symphony and chorus and have a part to play and a song to sing.

So, every Christian receives a call. Every Christian is a minister. But not every Christian is called to be a minister of Word and Sacrament. The calling to be a minister of Word and Sacrament has many unique features, requirements, demands, and duties. And the duties of most ministers of Word and Sacrament in America have multiplied in recent generations and so have the expectations placed upon them by most congregations. But one duty is still considered basic by most Protestant congregations, preaching.

Preaching involves many tasks—not least among them still is studying the Bible and telling people what it says. For this reason, Karl Barth describes the life of a minister of the Word as a daily "double assault." Ministers of the Word are to read the Bible daily. If they do, it will guide and comfort them. But if they are reading it properly, it will also assault them. It will tell them things they do not want to hear. But their job is not only to *hear* what the Bible says, but to *tell* the people what it says. And when they tell the people what it says, do you know what happens often enough? The people assault them for telling them what it says. According to Barth, this is the daily double-sided assault of every true minister of the Word.

My father was a pastor for forty years. He served as faithfully and joyfully as any pastor I have ever known. But he said preaching was like dying every week—dying to the text. One may have all sorts of things one wants to say or wants to avoid saying. But a true minister or servant of the Word must not only submit but die to the text. Dying isn't pleasant. It's like, well, dying. But for the Christian pastor, the great thing about dying

every week is the promise and—often enough—the experience of resurrection. The apostle Paul understood this. He said, "*I die daily*" (I Cor. 15:31).

Paul understood what it meant to preach the Word in season and out of season, to be the target of many slings and arrows, to be assaulted, mocked, ridiculed, and slandered, to "*fight with wild beasts at Ephesus*" (I Cor. 15:32), and to have his calling doubted and disputed at every turn. Thus, it should come to us as no surprise that he introduced himself, repeatedly, as "*an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God*." The will of God sustained him and gave him courage—and it can sustain and give you courage, too.

There is no greater honor than to serve as a minister in Christ's church. There is no greater privilege than to be a pastor. But being a pastor is not easy. It is one of the most daring and demanding journeys one can take. It exposes one to some of the greatest joys yet some of the most devastating experiences of life. It tests one at every level of one's being. One is forced to face many challenges both internal and external. But in the midst of it all, there is God "*who,"* as today's text tells us, *"has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing.*" He has *"lavished upon us … the riches of his grace"* (Eph. 1: 3, 7–8) through Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord who has promised to never leave us or forsake us.

Brothers and sisters, you are not here by accident. You are here for a purpose. You have been called by God and "*he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion in the day of Jesus Christ*" (Phil. 1:6).

In the meantime, the foundation of our calling is firm and sure. It rests on an unshakeable foundation: *the will of God*. And no experience, no academic degree, no fancy robe, and no amount of pulpit jewelry can ever substitute for that. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This sermon was delivered at chapel during orientation week at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa, on Aug. 8, 2024.

Richard E. Burnett is Managing Editor of Theology Matters *and Director of the Master of Arts Program in Reformed Theology at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary*

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