



Greetings Genevans,

Friday, May 14, 2011

For twenty-five years or more, Geneva's denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA), has been struggling over some very important theological issues. The struggle centers on two questions: 1) Do we believe that Scripture is God's Word and is the first and foremost authority in the life of the Christian? 2) Do we believe that Christ alone is the means of salvation?

How we answer these questions ultimately guides us in our beliefs, our choices, our morality, and our understanding of Christian Discipleship. A new chapter in this struggle has placed our denomination in the news this week. Several members and friends of our congregation have seen these stories and have inquired about the implications of the passage of "Amendment 10a". It is a big deal. Concern is appropriate. Media reports have highlighted how this change will make it acceptable for PC(USA) churches to ordain sexually active homosexuals. The action has implications for heterosexuals, too.

What Changed?

The old language stated that those who are called to office in the church are to lead lives "in obedience to Scripture and in conformity with the historic confessional standards of the church". It went on to specify "fidelity in the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman" or "chastity in singleness." It pointed out that persons who would not submit to these standards were not to be ordained. *Put simply, the old standard called leaders to submit to the Bible and to honor God with our sexuality.*

The new language says standards for ordained service "reflect the church's desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Christ in all aspects of life." It also says that "governing bodies" like our session and our presbytery, "shall be guided by the Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates." It sounds good. But in simple terms, *the new standard reduces scripture to a guide.* Presbyteries and local churches will have considerable latitude when it is time to decide who to ordain.

What does this change mean? The debates about these standards were generally framed around homosexuality. To quote St. Augustine Presbytery's stated clerk, Paul Hooker, "the change means that persons who are in same-gender relationships may now be considered for ordination and installation as deacons, elders, and ministers." But the change also removes restrictions for heterosexual persons who are sexually active outside of marriage. Local churches and presbyteries would be guided, but not bound, by what the Bible says about pre-marital and extra-marital sex.

What Are My Thoughts?

As a life-long Presbyterian, I am not pleased with this change to our Book of Order. I worked hard to prevent it since becoming an elder in 1992. At the time, it seemed like an attempt to encourage churches to accept pastors who were sexually active homosexuals. But since becoming a pastor in 2000, I've

fought passionately to protect our denomination from this step for a different reason. As I began to counsel couples and families, I learned much about the pain and destruction inflicted by church leaders who did not heed the call to honor God with their sexuality. Churches, families, individuals, and children can be hurt terribly when people ignore God's commands about sex. It is tragically foolish to do so. This fuels my passion to fight for scripture's authority in our denomination and our local church.

On the other hand, I recognize that my colleagues who have fought for this change have done so for noble reasons. They have felt they were fighting against bigotry and injustice, standing up for an excluded class. Many homosexual persons have endured rejection and hostility from churches. This fuels their passion to fight, too.

But one thing nearly every leader in our denomination agrees on is that we are weary of giving energy to battles over sex. We are not convincing each other. We would all like to do something productive.

So What Can We Do at Geneva?

We can develop our own requirements for ordination. The new amendment places a greater burden and responsibility for determining qualifications for pastors, elders, and deacons to presbyteries and also to sessions of local congregations. We can accept this challenge. I have asked your elders to begin to identify ordination standards that conform to biblical principles and the Reformed faith for use within our own congregation. We will try to have these in place by the end of August when the next group of officers is elected and begins training.

This may sound like a heavy task, but fortunately, there are plenty of precedents and guidelines for us as we begin this work. A few years ago, the San Diego Presbytery developed and adopted a document called *Essential Tenets and Reformed Distinctives*. They have used this document to serve as standards for ordained leadership in their presbytery. Our own Presbytery of St. Augustine has developed a similar document to guide the Committee on Preparation for Ministry in its work with seminary students and others answering the call to serve as pastors. Both are available on-line.

We can enter into relationships with other churches in the PC(USA) with a similar theological values. We would not be alone. Churches that value biblical faithfulness have been making connections for years. Some are already aligned. We would be welcome. This way we can share resources for ministry and stop wasting energy in a futile, endless battle.

Most importantly, we can remember that Jesus Christ is still the Head of the Church. The new amendment calls us those seeking ordained office to "joyfully submit to the Lordship of Christ in all aspects of life." That we can do enthusiastically! As we do, we will continue to serve Jesus Christ who is revealed in the scriptures of the Old and New Testament by the power of the Holy Spirit. We will affirm that those scriptures are God's Word to us. We will strive to be obedient to Christ, sensitive to the leading of the Spirit, and faithful to His Word.

Your session will be studying this issue diligently over the next month. Paul Hooker will meet with us in June to answer questions. The session will also develop a letter to you from their work, outlining our path forward. Please keep your session in prayer as we work on this matter. And remember,

God is faithful.



Jesse Alexander, Pastor

Looking For More Information?

If you would like more information on the recent passage of Amendment 10-A in the Presbyterian Church (USA), here are links to statements, articles and the like that should help answer some of your questions:

THE PRESBYTERIAN OUTLOOK www.pres-outlook.com

The Outlook is a fair, balanced and moderate publication that reports on news in the PCUSA. Click above for resources and Frequently Asked Questions.

FELLOWSHIP PCUSA www.fellowship-pcusa.org

This is a group that is working to plot a way forward beyond the division and the strife caused by ordination standard struggles, authority of Scripture, etc.

COVENANT NETWORK www.covnetpres.org

The Covenant Network is a progressive group within our denomination that has advocated for the passage of Amendment 10-A. Click above to see their response.

THE LAYMAN ONLINE www.layman.org

click above to be directed to the Presbyterian Layman, a conservative, evangelical renewal group within the PCUSA to see their response.

ST. AUGUSTINE PRESBYTERY www.staugpres.org

This is our local presbytery. Our stated clerk, Paul Hooker, has crafted several documents as resources to understand the implications of this change.

ESSENTIAL TENETS AND REFORMED DISTINCTIVES

From San Diego Presbytery (used as a standard)
presbyterysd.org/docs/ETRD_030608.pdf

From St. Augustine Presbytery (used as a guide)
staugpres.org/Portals/1399/CPM/Candidates/ESSENTIAL%20TENETS-use%20these.pdf