

A Pastoral Epistle

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The idea of councils populated by representatives from smaller, more local units of church government derives from the Council at Jerusalem as reported in the 15th Chapter of Acts. That first council met to consider the issue at hand, made a decision, and then reported back to the churches by means of the representatives. The council spoke to the church.

The 221st General Assembly

In keeping with the ancient Biblical precedent, the 221st General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) recently concluded its meeting. Grace Presbytery's twelve ruling and teaching elder commissioners plus the one young adult advisory delegate will soon be reporting back. Unlike the First Century precedent, news media are reporting on the General Assembly, but they have little understanding of either the process or the issues. Of course, they will not report on the whole General Assembly. Most of several hundred actions will go unnoticed (by the vast majority of Presbyterians as well!), but mostly sound bites will be offered on those matters that will titillate public attention. Still, as was the case at the original Council at Jerusalem, the General Assembly has *spoken to (not for) the church*.

The item that will gain most attention is the approval of the recommendation from the Assembly Committee on Civil Union and Marriage issues—an Authoritative Interpretation and a proposed Amendment. The "Authoritative Interpretation" of W-4.9000 (the Directory for Worship section on marriage) reads, in part, *...Because a service of marriage is one form of such worship, when a couple requests the involvement of the church in solemnizing their marriage as permitted by the laws of the civil jurisdiction in which the marriage is to take place, teaching elders have the pastoral responsibility to assess the capabilities, intentions, and readiness of the couple to be married, and the freedom of conscience in the interpretation of Scripture to participate in any such marriage they believe the Holy Spirit calls them to perform.*

The text of the proposed amendment of W-4.9000 reads, in part, *Marriage is a gift God has given to all humankind for the well-being of the entire human family. Marriage involves a unique commitment between two people, traditionally a man and a woman, to love and support each other for the rest of their lives. The sacrificial love that unites the couple sustains them as faithful and responsible members of the church and the wider community.*

In civil law, marriage is a contract that recognizes the rights and obligations of the married couple in society. In

the Reformed tradition, marriage is also a covenant in which God has an active part, and which the community of faith publicly witnesses and acknowledges. If they meet the requirements of the civil jurisdiction in which they intend to marry, a couple may request that a service of Christian marriage be conducted by a teaching elder in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), who is authorized, though not required, to act as an agent of the civil jurisdiction in recording the marriage contract....

Nothing herein shall compel a teaching elder to perform nor compel a session to authorize the use of the church property for a marriage service that the teaching elder or the session believes is contrary to the teaching elder's or the session's discernment of the Holy Spirit and their understanding of the Word of God.

Connectionalism, Congregationalism, and Denominational Affiliation

The perceptive reader might notice that there is no mention of same-gender marriage in either the Authoritative Interpretation or the proposed Amendment to the *Book of Order*. One thing is the *same*. A principle that has been true in the PCUSA since 1789 is once again affirmed: Presbyterian ministers have always been free, under their reading of Scripture and their understanding of the leading of the Holy Spirit, to determine whether or not to perform a service of marriage (subject to *Book of Order* guidelines). And sessions have always been free to determine the use of the church property. Both the Authoritative Interpretation and the proposed Amendment affirm those long-held principles.

The thing that has *changed* is that a couple, although traditionally a man and a woman, may be *two people*, without other designation. The effect of the Authoritative Interpretation is to allow pastoral discretion to perform any marriage they believe the Holy Spirit calls them to perform, where legal by state law. The effect of the Amendment, if it passes the majority of the presbyteries, would be to allow a pastor to officiate at a same-gender marriage if he/she were so inclined, and allow a session to permit the use of church facilities for a same-gender marriage if they were so inclined. Therefore, both Authoritative Interpretation and Amendments are *permissive* rather than *prescriptive*.

The PCUSA is a connectional church, whereby a council elected of representatives may speak to the whole church. Congregational denominations may voluntarily gather in councils, but all things are left to the discretion of the local congregation. Any congregation may take any action or establish any policy they feel led to, without risk of discipline—for either pastors or congregations—by the denomination. (If a congregation was seen to have egregiously departed from the teaching or spirit of the denomination in a

state or national assembly, the majority of a particular body could vote to “withdraw fellowship,” but little else.) In the case of the “non-denominational” churches, there is no authority beyond the local congregation to judge either belief or practice.

In a connectional church, whether anyone agrees with every action of the “higher judicatories” or not, there is still the stability of a shared heritage and commonly accepted constitution—common understanding of a belief system, form of governance, principles of worship, and Christian lifestyle. These are not simply a matter of the position or whim of the current congregational leadership. One of the *Great Ends of the Church* is, after all, the *preservation of the truth* (which has been more the function of denominations than either individuals or congregations).

The times they are a-changin’

No, quoting the title of an old protest song does not suggest that the revelation of the nature and will of God is subject to cultural fashion! But the motto and conviction *the church reformed, always reforming* does reflect the understanding that both the understanding and application of eternal truths will always be in a state of flux. The creation story in the very first chapter of Genesis ends with God’s admonition to humankind: *Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it.* This may be the one thing understood to be God’s command that humanity has been consistently and universally faithful to! And yet, at the present rate of population growth, according to present estimates, the limits of the planet’s resources to support the human population may be reached and exceeded in less than half a century. We have indeed subdued the earth to the point of abusing it. All of that simply says that unchecked obedience to a long-perceived command of God is in question.

The understandings of God’s plan and place for women has modified as well. In Genesis we are aware of Sarah’s distress at the taunting of Hagar because Sarah had not been able to conceive a child, and thus be a valid woman in the view of her culture. In the opening of I Samuel we meet Hannah who, at the taunting of Peninnah, wept continually and would not eat because she had not been able to conceive a child, and thus be a valid woman in the view of her culture. Of course, both women did eventually bear a child, but there were many who suffered a lifetime of abuse in ancient times because they could not bear children. In these days, we do not measure the validity of womanhood by whether they bear children or by how many they bear.

A major purpose of family in ancient understanding would be for the healthy nurture of offspring. Oh, that is *still* a major understanding of family. But men and women getting married today may be unable to have

children or even choose not to. The church, in such cases, has not declared any childless woman to be less of a woman, nor the childless family to be less of a family. So we *retain* the traditional norm, but do not taunt, persecute, or exclude those who, for whatever reason, *depart* from the traditional norm.

Whenever two people have come to me wanting to get married, I ask them the question, “Why get married?” Now, don’t read into that question that I advocate that they just live together “without benefit of clergy!” I just want to know what the motivations are. A fringe benefit of marriage in past times was society’s permission to cohabit and to have sexual intimacy. (And for some, it wasn’t just a *fringe* benefit!) Whatever one may think of it, that concept has changed in our current American society. That change may offer a possibility of a more mature understanding of marriage—that one person feels incomplete without the other, and wants to seal that relationship with a solemn promise before God and those who are closest. So the purpose of marriage may still be developing.

Departure from the norm

Of course, we need to remember that homosexuality is not a product of the 21st, 20th, or even the 19th Century. If in Leviticus the expression of same-gender attraction is called an “abomination,” then it was apparently a fact of life from the earliest of days.

I claim to be neither a biologist or sociologist nor the son of a biologist or sociologist. There is little that I can share from expert testimony. I can only recount what seems to be three views of why same-gender attraction exists.

The oldest view, reflected in some Biblical expressions, was that same-gender attraction is deliberately *chosen* behavior, and as such is a willful, sinful departure from the norm of the will and plan of God. There are people of faith that believe this sinful, chosen behavior is alone the genesis of homosexuality.

With the advent of more understanding of behavioral science, there has developed the conviction that same-gender attraction is a product of one’s environment...that it has been *nurtured*. One had an unfortunate family situation, or did not adjust past pre-adolescence, or was denied normal sexual expression (as in prisons, sailing ships, military, etc). Same-gender attraction may have been therefore *chosen*, but *inadvertently*, not deliberately.

In these days of specialized observation and research into genetics, color brain scans, etc., a third view has emerged, one which fits more in line with the testimony of the majority of homosexual individuals who say, “I have never known myself otherwise.” One did not wake up one morning and say, “I think I’ll be gay.” It is simply one’s *nature* and may have been a long-held and often closely guarded secret.

There are many things that appear a departure from the norm that have a genetic component. We know there may be a biological explanation for things such as diabetes, substance abuse,

bipolar disorder or depression, high blood pressure or cholesterol, or a number of physical diseases. Now, *if you just heard me, in the preceding statement, equate any of those conditions to homosexuality, you have misread and misunderstood the point!* A parallel was made to simply say that for many conditions that appear to be a departure from the “norm” we know there is a biological explanation. There is growing evidence that same-gender attraction is one such condition. Dealing with that which departs from the norm (i.e. the experience or conclusion of the majority) has never been comfortable for the majority.

The issue is justice.

It is this third component that leads all of the matters related to homosexuality to the dockets of church councils. It is a matter of *justice*. Every human being has a basic need for intimacy. In the foregoing list, a diabetic may well (if not happily) do without carbohydrates, someone prone to substance abuse without the substance, a person with a mood or physical disorder can take drugs which can improve the situation—these are the inconveniences one may endure. But in the basic need for intimacy, the question is whether the God we have come to know fully through Jesus Christ, a sovereign God, would create or allow a condition on the one hand and deny the fulfilling of a basic human need on the other, when fulfilling that basic need does not constitute harm to another individual or to society itself.

But the Bible says...

The Reformed faith has always seen the Bible as the primary resource for seeking to know the nature and character of God and what God wills for humanity. The Bible is authoritative for us. What we glean from Scripture as the nature and will of God is not a matter of whether we *read and follow* the Bible as much as it is *how we read and interpret* it. We believe the Bible contains the truth. There are some who believe and who say, with sometimes impressive certitude, that the Bible is verbally inspired by God and is thus infallible, inerrant in every detail. To really believe such an idea carries with it a whole set of issues. Most tend to be rather selective in what parts they read.

The PCUSA, through statements of faith contained its *Book of Confessions*, has a historical record of the church—back to 325 A.D., through the Reformation, and into the current age—trying to state what it believes Scripture teaches in the light of current conditions. Those statements of faith suggest some guidelines for interpreting the Scripture. Though the truths of Scripture are inspired by the Holy Spirit and are discerned under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, God has been pleased to use human agents to record these truths. The work of human agents include the context of the cultural mindset of the society in which they lived, their world view, the language they had at their disposal, the recipient of their work, the purpose for its writing, and the historical situation. The final word about God and God’s will is found in the whole of Scripture and the final conclusions reached. For Christians, the five books of the *Torah* are not the last word about the nature and will of God, and neither is the

whole of the Hebrew Scriptures. In fact, the final and most authoritative interpretation of Scripture is the life, teaching, death, and Resurrection of Jesus the Christ, who is declared in Scripture as *the Word made flesh*.

Some may protest that this *interpretation* is a lot of work. But for a human finite mind to fathom an infinite and eternal God there must be more effort expended than we might use to respond to a few media sound bites about the best laundry soap to buy, the best breakfast food to eat, or the best car to drive. Both the Second Helvetic Confessions and the Westminster Confession recognize and state that the full understanding of the will and nature of God is either set down or may be deduced from Scripture and the Second Helvetic Confession adds: *which agree with the rule of faith and love, and contributes much to the glory of God and man’s salvation*. For instance, almost all Christians believe in the *Trinity* as an expression of the fullness of the revelation and work of God. But the doctrine of the *Trinity* is not expressly set down in Scripture; it is a deduction.

Living with diversity

Of course, the problem with *interpretation* or *deducing* from Scripture is that different people reach different conclusions from reading the same Scripture and from trying to discern the leadership of the same Spirit, not to mention what agrees with the rule of faith and love. All Christians must come to terms with living with diversity. The Presbyterian Church has not demanded that all of its members be in lockstep with everything they believe. We find our unity in common commitment to the Lordship and leading of Jesus Christ. That diversity has attracted many to the church. But it carries with it the seeds of dissent and conflict.

Congregations may be diverse...most of them are. Some are more diverse than others. While some people may want a more homogenous constituency, most relate to the congregation that best suits their needs, and just choose to sublimate the rest. I was raised in a congregation where it was considered sinful to dance, to go to movies, to engage in “mixed bathing,” and to consume alcohol in any quantity. My parents were part of the foundation stones and inner core of that church, but they really did not agree that any of those were “sins.” We celebrated what we did agree on, kept quiet about the rest, and did what we felt proper. It worked for us then. And, by the way, you’ll not hear of any of those “sins” from the pulpit of that same congregation today. We chose to live with diversity.

Denominations may be diverse. Most of them have disabused themselves that theirs is the only way to relate to God. The differences are more often simply a matter of heritage, taste, and style. The work of church councils that *speak to the church* may represent the will of the

majority present at the council's assembly. Most congregations, even in *connectional* churches relate to their denomination much like my parents did in the congregation of my upbringing. They celebrate what they do agree on, keep quiet about the rest, and do what they feel proper (according to their own discernment of the leading of the Holy Spirit). This is the urging in the particular latest PCUSA General Assembly action concerning marriage. I have witnessed controversy over particular issues for some forty-five years of my ordination. In most cases, I have found that most congregations and even denominations have eventually come around to the position so fraught with conflict in our own denomination when those particular issues were first addressed.

The Christian Faith itself is diverse. Christians never have agreed with each other. In the first two centuries after the Resurrection there were significant differences as to belief about the very nature of Christ. Some thought he was divine, but not human. Others thought he was human, but not divine. Many thought he was both. The fourth Century *Nicene Creed* was a statement of what the majority could agree on. The *Reformation* itself is another example. The awesome variety of expressions of the Christian faith today just leads us to conclude: *If you can't tolerate diversity, you can't tolerate Christianity.*

What would Jesus do?

Here we may have to deduce a little in the current debate, and having done so will reach conclusions that will be diverse. Jesus never had a specific question addressed to him concerning same-gender marriage. In the gospels as we have them, he did not choose to address that issue. In the places Jesus does address marriage it is usually in the context of addressing divorce between married persons. It should be noted that in the account recorded in Matthew 19 and in Mark 10 Jesus did reference Genesis, chapter 2.

There are several issues today that we seek the leading of Jesus by deduction. We know that, overall, Jesus taught that his way was to achieve the abundance of life. We know that he taught that the law was made for the benefit of humanity and not humanity for the law. We know that he taught us to love one another, and that this love would be a witness to the world.

We can only conjecture what Jesus' teaching might be concerning same-gender attraction, given current research and understanding. The question is going to come back down to *why* same-gender attraction—deliberate or inadvertent *choice*, or *nature*? Where is the abundance of life to be found—in repression or expression? Is the traditional expression of the law for *benefit* to individuals and society, or does it simply oppress a

significant minority? For most of us, the attraction to and acceptance of any research is probably based upon whether it offers confirmation of our own convictions...until and if it ever becomes definitive.

The thing that Jesus seems to discourage is *judging* others in the sense of minding someone else's business. Only God has all the evidence needed and the infallible sense of justice to make a competent judgment. Jesus seems to prefer that we address our own personal fallibilities. On his last night on earth he gave that new commandment: *Love one another.*

So, where are we?

There is a diversity of opinion among Christians, Presbyterians, and members of particular congregations concerning the issues of marriage that are before us. The General Assembly action before us suggests that each of us, each pastor, and each session must try to discern the leading of the Holy Spirit. People who love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love their neighbor as themselves will discern *this* issue, just as they have discerned others throughout history... *differently.*

Back in the Spring I was working in my front yard. Three young women, Mormon missionaries, were working our street. They approached me, identified themselves, and told something of what they had to share. I shared with them my own convictions about Jesus Christ as the fullness of the revelation of God. They asked me if I had ever read a *Book of Mormon*. I explained that I had skimmed it, but while they were getting money together for a building, the local Mormon congregation had cohabited in the church I served when I first came to Dallas. I had talked to the Bishop many times. And yes, I did have a *Book of Mormon* somewhere on the shelf. By then, we had gone off their script so many times that the spokesperson for the three finally said, "We know what we believe is true." (This is an assertion that many make: *If I believe something to be true, it is true.*) I responded, "And I know what I believe is true. Where we *disagree* on what is true then either one of us is wrong, or the almighty, everlasting, and infinite God is greater than either of our minds can conceive." With apparently nothing left to say, they pleasantly bid me a good afternoon and went on their way.

On the matters now before us due to the activity of the 221st General Assembly, I know that I am not infallible. I do not have the last word on same-gender attraction and I cannot inerrantly proclaim where our Lord might come down. I personally have my convictions, but I do not have certainty. God is bigger than my poor understanding can conceive. So for myself, I hope to be more inclined toward *love* than *judgment*. I could express that same hope for those in our church, so that the scandal of public bickering and vilifying be put away from us, so that we again let living and sharing the gospel be at the forefront of our attention, and so that, as in the early church, by our living out the commandment to love that we again have the good report of the people around us.