

Amendment 10-A: Yes or No?

Written by Dr. Mark Achtemeier and Dr. John B. (Mike) Loudon
Tuesday, 02 November 2010 22:24

Former PUP Task Force colleagues Mike Loudon and Mark Achtemeier have found many areas of agreement in their consideration of issues within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

However, on the issue of ordaining gays and lesbians, they take different positions. Read below the texts of their presentations from a recent Outlook Webinar on Amendment A - setting aside the "fidelity in marriage or chastity in singleness" standard for ordination. Purchase a \$29.95 Webinar download, including the verbal presentations by Achtemeier and Loudon and a 30-minute question and answer discussion, by [clicking here](#) .

Yes to Amendment 10-A Dr. Mark Achtemeier Presbyterian Outlook Webinar October 26, 2010

I want to begin by saying what a pleasure and privilege it is to engage this conversation with my good friend Mike Loudon. I got to know Mike through our service together on the Theological Task for the Peace, Unity and Purity of the church. One of the major discoveries coming out of that experience for me was recognizing how different our engagement of controversial issues can be when it takes the form of a conversation between friends who respect and care about one another. I consider it a great privilege to be able to have that kind of conversation with Mike today, and I am grateful to Jack Haberer and the Presbyterian Outlook for providing the opportunity.

We are here to talk about Amendment 10-A, the proposed replacement for Book of Order section G-6.0106b, which since 1996 has been used to discourage gay and lesbian believers from being considered for ordination.

Amendment 10-A

Standards for ordained service reflect the church's desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life (G-1.0000). The governing body responsible for ordination and/or installation (G-14.0240; G-14.0450) shall examine each candidate's calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability for the responsibilities of office. 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-4.4003). Governing bodies shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates.

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I am convinced this Amendment is worth supporting no matter which side of the ordination debate you find yourself on. This doesn't have to be a liberal/conservative issue. It doesn't have to be a debate about our sexuality policy. Amendment 10-A simply makes good sense. It will be beneficial for the whole church.

Today I want to highlight three reasons why this is the case. First, 10-A will bring peace to our Presbyteries by halting the endless succession of battles over proposed amendments to the Constitution. Second, the Amendment will remove divisive ambiguity from the Book of Order, sparing our church huge amounts of costly litigation in the church courts. And third, Amendment A will help us become the kind of faithful church where divisive issues can be handled more graciously and productively than we have seen in the recent past. Let me speak to each of these points in turn.

Amendment A will bring peace to the presbyteries

This year marks the fifth time since 1996 that the Assembly has asked the presbyteries to vote on the sexuality policy contained in section G-6.0106b of our Book of Order. The General Assembly prior to our most recent one sent a similar amendment around to the presbyteries, where it was defeated by narrow margins. And now we are dealing with Amendment 10-A, which was sent out by the 219th General Assembly this past June.

The sentiment I encounter most often from people in response to these events is a weary frustration. "Why do we have to keep voting on this issue year after year?" they ask. "Why don't our votes decide anything?" "Why can't we just settle the issue and move on?"

And of course this continual stream of proposed amendments coming down from the Assembly is not just a matter of repetition and inconvenience. These votes cost the church a huge price in time and energy and money and good will. We are all fretting over the vote again today, just like we were two years ago. The people listening in today have spent good money to hear about the issue yet again. It's an important issue and it's good that we are all here, but in the best of all possible worlds, I can certainly think of more productive ways for all of us to be spending a Tuesday afternoon in service to the church!

The votes keeping coming around time and again. The reason for this is not all that hard to figure out when we think about it carefully.

We live in a 51-49 church. When you look at the actual vote counts cast by elders and ministers in the Presbyteries, the last vote on this issue comes out pretty close to that. We've had one Presbytery vote in this current round, and it came back a tie. The leaders of our congregations are just about as divided over this issue as it is possible to be. We have responsible, godly, biblically serious Presbyterians on both sides of the aisle.

And the problem with divisions this deep is that practically speaking, a two or three percent majority vote is never going to be enough to put an issue to rest. So long as we have a partisan position of either side enshrined in the Book of Order as official church teaching, there are going to be very large numbers of conscientious Presbyterians on the opposing side who feel

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duty-bound to press for change. And General Assemblies being what they are, when the divisions are so close, a passionate minority is always going to be able to sway enough folks in the middle to send the issue down to the presbyteries for another vote.

The solution to this situation is for us to be honest as a church in our public witness. There are times and seasons when the most faithful and truthful course for the church is to refrain from speaking publicly on a particular controversy. And when it comes to the sexuality debate, the plain truth is that we are a house divided, and as a body we are incapable of speaking on it with one voice. We put up a false front to the world when we adopt a partisan position as our official policy that ignores the conscientious convictions of a very substantial portion of our own membership. And the bitter fruit of this dishonest witness is an endless stream of turmoil in our denomination.

The great gift that Amendment 10-A brings to our church is that it is **not** a partisan statement from either side. It lifts up mainstream Presbyterian values that all of us can affirm. It does not take a position pro or con on the sexuality debate, but affirms the Lordship of Christ and directs us to a serious appropriation of our ordination vows, which affirm that we will carry out our ministries in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture, and continually guided by our confessions.

With Amendment A incorporated into the Constitution, we will no longer be in a situation where a large portion of the church experiences a serious violation of conscience through the church's public witness on this issue. And that means the reason to keep re-fighting the issue every time we have an Assembly will go away. The church will be saying what we are able to affirm together with integrity—that we are all trying conscientiously to follow Jesus as we know him in the Scriptures and affirm him in our ordination vows. We will not leave half our leadership feeling violated by proclaiming a hotly contested conclusion as the official position of the whole church.

Once we get an honest, non-partisan statement in the Book of Order, all the people who are tired of fighting will rally around it, and there will no longer be a majority of Assembly commissioners wanting to dislodge it. Amendment 10-A will give us the break we have all been longing for, eliminating the need for the poor, long-suffering Presbyteries to re-fight our denominational policy every time we have a General Assembly.

Amendment A will remove divisive ambiguity from our Constitution

Many people assume that the fidelity-chastity provision in G-6.0106b provides a secure safeguard against the ordination of practicing gay and lesbian Christians:

G-6.0106b

Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman (W-4.9001), or chastity in singleness. Persons refusing to repent of any

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self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as deacons, elders, or ministers of the Word and Sacrament.

Even if you are one who believes a safeguard against such ordinations is necessary, it is not at all clear that the current language will be able to provide it over the long term.

Court cases around matters of sexuality policy have started pointing out serious ambiguities in the text of G-6.106b. Let me highlight a few of them. First, "Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture..."

Obviously obedience to Scripture is a good and desirable thing. Those of us who are sincere Christians are all striving to follow the teachings of Jesus faithfully, and to conform our lives to scriptural teaching. But those of us who are striving to be disciples also know the truth in what Scripture tells us about our efforts: that we all fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23). In citing obedience to Scripture as an ordination requirement without nuance or qualification, G-6.0106b collides with our Confessions. Question 149 of the Westminster Larger Catechism affirms what we all know to be the case:

Q 149. Is any man able perfectly to keep the Commandment of God?

A. No man is able, either of himself, or by any grace received in this life, perfectly to keep the Commandments of God; but doth daily break them in thought, word and deed.

Contrary to what G-6.0106b would appear to require, no one is able perfectly to keep the Commandments of God.

The result of this collision between the language of our constitution and the reality of the Christian life as described in Scripture and our Confessions is that G-6.0106b becomes an inadequate vehicle for imposing simple, straightforward requirements on the church. The Advisory Committee on the Constitution has been saying for some time that by framing its discussion of standards in terms of an unqualified and impossible obedience to Scripture, G-6.0106b inevitably involves the church in matters of interpretation and judgment about what kind and how much obedience the church is going to require, since none of us lives perfectly in accordance with Scriptural teaching.

G-6.0106b also speaks about a requirement of "chastity in singleness." Arguments are starting to appear in current court cases pointing out the ambiguities of this phrase, and raising doubts about whether this requirement actually excludes partnered gay and lesbian Christians from ordained office. Many people assume that "chastity in singleness" is a synonym for "celibacy," that it means you are refraining from sexual activity. But it's not at all clear that definition can be sustained.

Question 108 of the Heidelberg Catechism, for example, conveys a very different understanding:

Q 108. What does the seventh commandment teach us?

A. That all unchastity is condemned by God, and that we should therefore...live chaste and

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disciplined lives whether in holy wedlock or in single life.

If chastity is a virtue of married as well as single life, it obviously cannot mean refraining from all sexual activity. And if chastity can be practiced in the context of a heterosexual marriage, why not in a faithful, covenanted same-gender partnership?

In short, if our confessions understand chastity as meaning something other than refraining from sexual activity, the notion that a “chastity in singleness” requirement is going to effectively exclude partnered gay and lesbian people from ordination seems very doubtful.

The ambiguity of the current language doesn't stop there. The last sentence of G-6.0106b reads, “Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained...” The problem here is figuring out what a refusal to repent might mean. Repentance is repeatedly defined in our confessions as process in which a person comes to recognize his or her sin, and in horror turns away from it to seek salvation in God's mercy. Question 87 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism presents an apt example:

Q 87. What is repentance unto life?

A. Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin...doth
,
grief and hatred of his sin
, turn from it unto God...

Knowledge of one's own sin and a feeling of true remorse for it are essential components of repentance as our tradition understands it.

By this definition, a refusal to repent would presumably mean having knowledge of one's sin, but stubbornly refusing to turn away from it. It is not at all clear this applies, however, to persons who in all good conscience do not believe their covenanted relationship with a beloved partner are inherently sinful.

The debate in our church is not about whether it's important to be live an upright or moral life—everyone agrees that faithfulness is important. The debate is about what true faithfulness actually looks like in particular situations. We might say that people who disagree with us over sexuality are mistaken in how they interpret and follow Scripture. But being mistaken in one's beliefs is very different from refusing to repent. Neither repentance nor its refusal is possible apart from a sincere belief that the activity in question is actually sinful. Refusing to repent is not a relevant charge to bring against people who don't believe what they are doing is a sin.

The problem with these ambiguities in the language of G-6.0106b is that they are more than just academic issues. Whether we personally find these ambiguities compelling or not, the lack of clarity they represent opens the door to a long series of legal challenges and complaints, asking our church courts and General Assembly to clarify and interpret the ambiguous terms contained in our constitution. Such legal actions tend to be slow and drawn out and incredibly expensive. The resolution of a single case can cost well in excess of \$100,000! And it will take a great many cases to sort out all the issues left hanging by the flawed language of G-6.0106b.

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In sum, when we have in our church's constitution a partisan statement on an issue that deeply divides the church, the result is going to be a never-ending series of fights in the Presbyteries around votes to change it. In addition to those battles, the ambiguities in the actual language of G-6.0106b also promise a long and costly series of fights in the church courts. And after all that effort, the end result is likely to be a safeguard that is too full of holes to be effective anyway! In the meantime the amount of time and energy and money and emotion being devoted to these struggles is completely scandalous.

Over and over again I hear people saying we need to stop, that our church needs to find a way to move beyond this damaging debate and get on with the business of spreading the Gospel. Amendment 10-A is a way to do just that by lifting up the Lordship of Jesus!

Amendment A will help us faithfully handle disagreement

So what would happen in the church if we replaced the current language of G-6.0106b with Amendment A? Would we be doing away with sexual morality, depriving the defenders of the traditional status quo of any grounds for defending their position? To the contrary! The foundations of faithful biblical morality would remain strongly present in our ordination standards!

G-6.0106a in our Book of Order would continue with a strong statement about qualifications for ministry: "[T]hose who undertake particular ministries should be persons of strong faith, dedicated discipleship, and love of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Their manner of life should be a demonstration of the Christian gospel.."

Amendment A itself would lift up the church's desire "to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life." It also requires examining bodies to determine a candidate's ability and commitment to fulfill the requirements expressed in the ordination vows. This is an exacting standard, for included in the ordination vows are requirements to acknowledge Christ as Lord of all and head of the Church, accept Scripture to be the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ and God's Word to each of us, receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed Faith, obey Christ under the authority of Scripture, guided by the confessions, and many others.

Under Amendment A, there will be no backing away in our ordination process from a full affirmation of the Lordship of Christ and the authority of Scripture. And those who want to argue that these affirmations mean excluding practicing gay and lesbian believers will have every right and ground to make their case.

Several things will change under Amendment A. First, we will see a change in the nature and location of the debate. Instead of being a national fight about constitutional language carried on among large groups of relative strangers in the General Assembly or the church courts, the debate will become a conversation about individual candidates coming before our presbyteries and sessions. This means that our church's practice will be worked out among people who live and work and minister together, and who consequently have the opportunity to engage this issue as a conversation among friends. Having served together on the Peace, Unity and Purity Task Force, Mike and I both know how much more productive the conversation becomes when

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that happens.

The debate will also become a conversation about Scripture, replacing the current focus on arcane details of constitutional language and case law. This focus on the main issues will be all to the good, helping our church to keep in mind the real issues.

The third change we will see is that our denomination will become more flexible in its approach to the ordination issue, allowing more room for differences of opinion. Individual candidates would be examined on a case-by-case basis, and it is probable that some presbyteries and some regions of the country will prove to be more open than others to the ordination of gay and lesbian believers.

Now some people have stuck a “local option” label on this kind of arrangement, as if that in itself were sufficient to condemn it. But local option in fact has a long and distinguished history in our Presbyterian system, especially in times of controversy. This is nothing new. Candidates whose views are wonderfully suited for ministry in rural Iowa may not be the best fit for churches in uptown Manhattan, and vice versa. These regional variations are precisely the reason why we have local governing bodies examining candidates for ministry, rather than running everyone through a uniform national process. Such regional variations are also the reason why, when a minister moves from one presbytery to another, we re-examine that person for ministry in the new context, rather than allowing the first examination to confer across-the-board approval.

There are good, biblical reasons for confidence that God’s grace will continue to guide the church in and through such variations in its practice. It is helpful to recall the advice of wise old rabbi Gamaliel in Acts 5. When confronted with the possibility of some radical and unprecedented changes within his religious community, he advised his colleagues to show some flexibility and toleration: *“...if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail, but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them--in that case you may even be found fighting against God!”* (Acts 5:38-39).

There are also helpful discussions in the theological tradition associated with the name of St. Alphonsus de Liguori which suggest that allowing flexibility in the church’s practice may in fact be the path of higher righteousness. These discussions consider what the church should do in a situation where its best teachers disagree over the validity of church law. The practical conclusion of these discussions is that the church is justified in making room for the less restrictive practice if there is a situation where the law is opposed by five or six faithful and dedicated church teachers who have proper training in such matters.

Now in point of fact, the PC(USA) currently has many more than five or six distinguished teachers who question the faithfulness of excluding gay and lesbian Christians from ordination. In 2001, 33 bible scholars—half the biblical faculties of our Presbyterian seminaries--sent out a letter, titled *The Whole Bible for the Whole Human Family,* which opposed the continued exclusion of gay and lesbian persons from ordination. In addition to the bible scholars, there are also a great many theologians and ethicists and pastoral counselors in our seminaries who hold similar views.

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When a church law is in significant doubt like this, many theologians have argued that the church is justified in taking a more lenient position in its application. The reason for this becomes clear when we consider the stakes involved in being wrong on either side of the issue.

If the teachers advocating the exclusion are wrong and the church follows them, it runs the risk of creating false barriers and impediments to the Gospel, driving people away from Jesus! But if those teachers who advocate inclusion are in error, and people listen to their advice, the worst that will happen is that people will believe them and commit sins of ignorance, which are easily covered by grace. In a situation where there is serious doubt about the faithfulness of excluding gays and lesbians from the ministry, the safest path spiritually is to err on the side of grace. Passing Amendment A would open up this safer path of gracious flexibility to the Presbyterian Church.

Finally, it is worth noting one additional effect that the passage of Amendment A will have for the church. Because passage would move the debate to the presbyteries, it would significantly empower individual Presbyterians to have a meaningful impact on the church's practice. Under the current status quo, the debate over sexuality is focused at the national level on technical issues of constitutional language and changes in the Book of Order. This focus tends to lodge major power and influence with single-issue national advocacy groups. Consequently, it leaves ordinary Presbyterians feeling helpless and disempowered, unable to make a meaningful contribution to the church's conversation.

With the passage of Amendment A, the church's position will be a function of what actually takes place in sessions and presbyteries as they consider the calls of individual candidates. That means the way for me to make a difference is simple and clear: I talk to my friends! I engage my neighbors and colleagues at presbytery and on the session. I sit down with my friend Mike for a serious conversation. I can do more than just send money to some far-off advocacy group, my own voice is important. My ability to persuade other people makes a difference. That's the kind of church I want to be a part of. That's the way followers of Christ who care about the church and one another engage difficult issues.

Summing up the case I have made today, I believe the church should pass Amendment A because it will put an end to the never-ending cycle of General Assembly battles and Presbytery votes that drain so much time, money and energy away from the church's mission. Amendment A will remove ambiguity from our Constitution and spare us a long, frustrating and extremely costly round of technical litigation in our church courts. And Amendment A will move the debate over sexuality down to the local level where a faithful flexibility can help ease tensions in the church, and allow ordinary people to make a difference.

Let me again express my thanks and appreciation to the Presbyterian Outlook for hosting this event, to my friend Mike Loudon for agreeing to sit down and have a conversation today, and to all of you who care enough about the church to listen in.

Dr. Mark Achtemeier has served the Presbyterian Church since 1984 as a pastor, theologian, and seminary professor.

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Outlook Webinar Dr. John B. (Mike) Loudon October 26, 2010

Thank you very much for the opportunity to share in this webinar and to enter into a discussion and debate with my friend, Mark Achtemier. During my time, I plan to mix together personal reflections, biblical interpretation, historical study, and the work of the PUP Task Force.

I was browsing through the stacks at a book store a month ago and came across a new entry entitled 1969: The Year that Changed Everything, written by Rob Kirkpatrick. The title was intriguing and I began flipping through the book. As I did, a flood of memories cascaded through my mind. I was in college during the year of 1969. I attended a small, sheltered, church related school in Western Pennsylvania. War protests, student takeovers of administration buildings, and campus riots did not occur at my college. We watched those things unfolding on TV, but they seemed a world away from the campus of Westminster College in quaint New Wilmington, Pennsylvania, where Amish buggies pulled by horses clip-clopped through the town each morning. However, 1969 was a year that sociologists, and those who study such things, now look back upon as a year that significantly changed the way many of us look at life. It was the year of the Broadway musicals Hair and O Calcutta and the movie Midnight Cowboy. It was the year of Woodstock and the year when Harvard University had a takeover of their administration building. It was the year the USA landed people on the moon, and it was the year that the Mylay Massacre in Vietnam became public knowledge. It was also the year when sexual orientation came into a wider public focus.

On June 28, 1969, police raided the Stonewall Inn in New York City, a bar frequented by gay men. Unlike previous raids, on this occasion the customers retaliated. So vehement was the response that the police barricaded themselves inside the bar for protection from the angry mob that formed outside. Stanley Grenz, in his book Welcoming But Not Affirming, writes that this event, coupled with singer Anita Bryant's crusade against homosexuality a few years later, marked a turning point in the relationship of gay and lesbian people to the wider society. Many gay and lesbian people began to come out of the closet and publicly affirm their sexual orientation. They wanted their voices to be heard.

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At first the goal seemed to be tolerance and the elimination of homophobia, but then the goal became helping society understand homosexual preference and orientation as being on an equal footing with heterosexual orientation and preference. For centuries, gay and lesbian people had been dismissed to the fringes of society. Now, however, they call for change and that call for change includes well known political leaders and respected Christian theologians and ethicists, like my friends Mark Achtemier and Jack Rogers, both of whom have been important spokespersons of the evangelical movement in the Presbyterian Church USA.

I grew up in the Presbyterian Church in the 1950's and '60's. I never gave much thought to the subject of homosexuality. It was not discussed, or if it was, it was dismissed as blatant sin. Of course, in the Presbyterian Church in which I was raised, the drinking of alcoholic beverages was also considered a blatant sin, and frankly I heard a whole lot more about that subject than I did about homosexuality.

Of course, I remember people making jokes about gay people, but I never remember a sermon or a Sunday school lesson on the subject. It just was not publicly discussed. There was a nice man who lived about six doors down the street from the home in which I was raised and he seemed different than other people on our street. He was single. He never dated women. He had male friends who visited often. My parents never used the word homosexual, although they tried to explain to me that he was different from other people. I wasn't sure what they were talking about. They also never warned me not to go near him. In fact, they liked him, as did most of the neighbors. He was a kind man and a good neighbor and very active in the local Roman Catholic Church, to which he was reported to have been very generous.

As a college and seminary student, I don't remember ever studying the subject of homosexuality in any of my classes. In preparation for this webinar debate, I read Dr. Achtemeier's keynote address, which he delivered last year at the Covenant Network Assembly. He explained that he, at one time, equated homosexual behavior with addiction, a view which he has since come to refute. I never held to such a view; although I remember reading in a psychology book that homosexuality developed because of a person's difficulty to connect properly with other people. The author viewed gay behavior as immature sexual behavior. I vaguely remember the Stonewall Inn incident from the television news, but it did not register significantly on my personal radar screen. As I said, all of that seemed light years away from the world in which I lived. However, when I became an ordained Presbyterian minister in 1973, that all changed.

The first major controversy I experienced as a young pastor was the Kenyon decision of 1974. It concerned the ordination of a Presbyterian seminary graduate who followed ordination procedures correctly, but during his assessment by the Committee on Preparation for Ministry, then called Candidate's Committee, shared that because of his interpretation of scripture, he did not believe women should be ordained to the ministry. He said he would be willing to work with women elders, but could not participate in their ordination. He claimed a scruple on what he

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viewed as a non-essential tenet of the constitution. Now that's an old Presbyterian piece of polity, which I'll get to in a few moments. While Mr. Kenyon's Candidate's Committee believed such a position barred him from ordination, his presbytery disagreed and voted to proceed with his ordination. One of the commissioners at the presbytery meeting, Dr. Maxwell, disagreed with the presbytery decision and appealed the case to the Synod's Permanent Judicial Commission. Eventually it went to the General Assembly PJC, which ruled that the candidate, Mr. Kenyon, could not be ordained. The General Assembly PJC overturned the action of a presbytery, which had permitted a candidate to follow time honored Presbyterian polity.

Now you may be wondering how in the world that plays into the subject of the ordination of sexually active gay and lesbian people. Well, let me continue with this history. A few years later, in 1976, two presbyteries having before them candidates who were self-acknowledged gay people, and knowing that the decision of scrupling had been set aside in the previously mentioned decision, asked the General Assembly for a ruling on what they called "the ordination of avowed practicing homosexuals." The General Assembly, in good Presbyterian fashion, formed a committee which studied the issue. When the committee report came to the General Assembly in 1979, the commissioners voted 97% to 3% to not permit the ordination of non-celibate gay and lesbian people. This action became known as the Definitive Guidance on this issue. Cliff Kirkpatrick and John Stott wrote a good book explaining it in detail.

Before going on and talking about Definitive Guidance and eventually the addition of G60106b to the constitution, let me take a few minutes and go back and talk about the Bible and homosexuality, and why this subject is of such concern to a number of people.

Most progressives view the issue of gay and lesbian ordination as a justice issue – a civil rights issue. They see it in the context of other social stigmas addressed in scripture. My friend, Jack Rogers, in his book Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality writes that most people in the church have changed their minds on subjects such as race, the role of women, and the issue of divorce and remarriage, and therefore they should be able to change their minds on the issue of homosexuality.

Most conservative evangelicals, on the other hand, some of whom are also very strong advocates of justice and civil rights, cannot get around the biblical texts that address the subject of homosexuality. They view the Bible as God's divinely inspired word, and therefore believe they are compelled to trust it and live by it.

The texts about homosexuality are not numerous, but they are of one mind on the subject. There's first of all the notorious story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Frankly, many conservatives, as well as progressives, dismiss this story as irrelevant to the topic.

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There are a couple of biblical texts in what is called the Old Testament Holiness Code in Leviticus 18:22 and Leviticus 20:13. These texts explicitly prohibit male homosexual intercourse. Of course, these texts also address a whole lot of other sexually related issues as well, which most of us have probably not addressed in sermons lately. If we have, the session has probably had a meeting with us to dissuade us from using that text any time soon.

In the New Testament there are two texts that address homosexual behavior – in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 and 1 Timothy 1:10. Dr. Richard Hayes, professor at Duke Divinity School, writes that the early church consistently adopted the Old Testament's teachings on matters of sexual morality, including homosexual acts. In the passages in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy, we find homosexuals included in the list of persons who do things unacceptable to God. Of course, there are a lot of other things in those lists that are unacceptable to God as well, including being greedy, a drunkard, a swindler, a slanderer, a murderer, a slave trader, a perjurer and a liar.

But many consider the most crucial text concerning homosexuality to be the first chapter of Romans, because this is the only passage in the New Testament that explains the condemnation of homosexual behavior in a theological context.

I remember a summer evening about 10 years ago when our youngest son, Nathan, and I were having a heart to heart conversation about the church. He's now a Presbyterian pastor serving a congregation in Kansas, but at that time he was sensing a call to the ministry and thinking about going to seminary. He was pondering the issues of the faith and bouncing ideas off of old dad. I probably wanted to discuss football or baseball, which we normally discussed as father and son, but the subject this evening drifted to the issue of homosexuality. I braced myself for what I thought he was going to say. He had recently graduated from college, so I thought, oh boy, here's where father and son are going to come to a different understanding of things. He said he had looked at the story of Sodom and Gomorrah and did not see how it was relevant to the issue. He went on to say that he had looked at the Old Testament Holiness Code, but frankly was not convinced by it. He was not convinced by 1 Corinthians or 1 Timothy, because he realized that there were plenty of sins listed there that should keep one from being ordained, and they don't. But then he said he could not get around Romans 1:24-27. Turns out, we were on the same page. That's where most evangelicals are. The text is just too explicit to ignore.

As Dr. Richard Hayes writes, "It is certainly true that Paul's portrayal of homosexual behavior in Romans 1 is of a secondary and illustrative character in relation to the mainline of the argument; however, the illustration is one that both Paul and his readers would have regarded as particularly vivid. Rebellion against the Creator who may be understood and seen in the things that he has made is made palpable in the flouting of sexual distinctions that are fundamental to God's creative design."

So the biblical witness against homosexual practice is of a single voice, it is morally wrong, and

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this is the reason that evangelicals do not view gay ordination as simply a justice and a civil rights issue. Evangelicals believe that homosexuality differs significantly from matters such as slavery or the subordination of women, concerning which the Bible contains internal tensions and a counter-posed witness. Therefore, deep divisions have arisen over the last few decades between progressives and evangelicals on this issue, and not just in the Presbyterian Church, but in many Christian denominations. We seem to be able to talk through our differences on most social, political, and theological divisions, but not on the subject of gay and lesbian ordination, or gay marriage for that matter.

Okay, let me go back now and pick up the subject of Definitive Guidance and the decision made by the 1978 General Assembly. During the 1980's, the issue of the ordination of non-celibate gay and lesbian people became a central debate in the Presbyterian Church and fractured the unity of the denomination. In the early 1990's, conservatives, fearing that Definitive Guidance would be countermanded by another vote of the General Assembly, pushed for it to become an authoritative interpretation. This it did in 1993, but then conservatives, fearing that was not enough, determined that there needed to be a constitutional amendment in the Book of Order. That's when a number of the evangelical renewal groups, such as PFR and The Lay Committee, joined together and formed the Presbyterian Coalition, which became the political arm of the renewal movement. The Fidelity and Chastity Amendment, G60106b, was approved by the General Assembly in 1996, and affirmed by the majority of the presbyteries. However, it was challenged at General Assembly the following year (1997), and then again in 2001, and in 2008. In each of these instances, while the General Assembly commissioners voted to remove the amendment, a majority of the presbyteries voted to retain it. It remains as part of our constitution.

Now it is being challenged for a 4th time. This debate over the ordination of non-celibate gay and lesbian people during the past 30 years has at times been bitter and hostile. Many believe it has drained energy from mission and outreach and shifted the church from being outwardly focused to being inwardly focused fighting battles of polity and theology and alienating people from one another.

In light of such divisions in the church, the 2001 General Assembly created a special task force of 20 people to "lead the Presbyterian Church USA in spiritual discernment of our Christian identity in and for the 21st century." In part, the task force was given the duty of trying to help the Presbyterian Church USA move beyond the ordination debate, the constant in-fighting and demonizing of one another. I was privileged to serve on that task force, which became known to many as PUP. We were officially called the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity. One of those who attended the very first meeting of that task force was Elizabeth Achtemier, Mark's mother. Tragically, however, she developed cancer soon after our first meeting and was never able to participate with us again. Mark was added to the task force somewhere around the 3rd or 4th meeting to take the place of his mother and we were delighted when he became a member of the task force.

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The individuals on the PUP task force represented the broad diversity of the Presbyterian Church USA. We met regularly for five years, during which time we came to love and respect one another. We studied, prayed, read the Bible, worshipped and socialized together. We shared the Lord's Supper at each gathering and adopted a group covenant. We paid special attention to process using tools for discernment to help us listen more carefully to each other. We attempted to model a new and different way forward for the church. That new way forward led us to examine our Presbyterian roots, and look back to other times when our denomination was badly divided. By studying the recommendations of the Swearingen Committee of 1927, and going back further to the Adopting Act of 1729, our task force found that our present and future is informed by our past.

When I was discussing the Kenyon Decision of 1974 earlier, I talked about Mr. Kenyon's scrupling and said that I would discuss this in depth further. Permit me to take a historic side journey to explain what scrupling is about and look with you at the Adopting Act. In 1706, the first presbytery was organized in Philadelphia. There were seven ministers and a few elders present for that meeting. There was no formal constitution, no Book of Order, and no Book of Confessions to guide the church.

In 1729, 23 years later, the Westminster Confession of Faith, which had been adopted by the Church of Scotland in 1645 as the basis for their constitution, was adopted as a constitution for the fledgling Presbyterian Church in the American colonies. All the elders and ministers were asked to subscribe to the Westminster Standards, however, one minister by the name of Jonathon Dickinson of New York was unable to agree with every jot and tittle of Westminster. A solution was proposed that made a distinction between essential and non-essential tenets in the theological standard. A candidate could claim that he had a scruple concerning what he believed was a non-essential tenet, and the presbytery then determined whether his scruple was indeed on an essential tenet or a non-essential tenet. The new interpretation became known as the Adopting Act and it gave leeway in the area of ordination. Dr. Beau Weston in his book Leading from the Center writes, "Each presbytery made the decision as to what were necessary and essential articles, within the limits set by the denomination constitutional confession."

The Adopting Act helped to settle concerns about ordination in the church in 1729 and again when our church reunited in 1869 after it had divided between what was called the New School and Old School, and again it helped calm the waters in 1927 when the final report of the Swearingen Commission was presented to that General Assembly. So the PUP Task Force looked back to the Swearingen Commission and further back to the Adopting Act of 1729 to come up with our report to the General Assembly.

The PUP Task Force brought seven recommendations to the 217th General Assembly which met in 2006 in Birmingham. The 5th recommendation was the most controversial. It called for an authoritative interpretation of G-6.0108 of the Book of Order and it stated – this is going to be

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a little confusing so I'll try to read carefully – A. The Book of Confessions and the form of government of the Book of Order set forth the scriptural and constitutional standards for ordination and installation; B. These standards are determined by the whole church, after the careful study of scripture and theology, solely by the constitutional process of approval by the General Assembly with the approval of the presbyteries. These standards may be interpreted by the General Assembly and its Permanent Judicial Commission; C. Ordaining and installing bodies, acting as corporate expressions of the church, have the responsibility to determine their membership by applying these standards to those elected to office. These determinations include C.1: whether a candidate being examined for ordination and/or installation as elder, deacon, or minister of Word and Sacrament, has departed from scriptural and constitutional standards for fitness for office; C.2: whether any departure constitutes a failure to adhere to the essentials of reformed faith and polity under G60108 of the Book of Order, thus barring the candidate from ordination and/or installation; D: Whether the ordaining installing body has conducted its examination reasonably, responsibly, prayerfully, and deliberately in deciding to ordain a candidate for church office is subject to review by higher governing bodies; and E: All parties should endeavor to outdo one another in honoring one another's decision, according to the presumption of wisdom to ordaining installing bodies in examining candidates, and to the General Assembly, with presbytery's approval, in setting standards.”

Sorry, that's a bit of a mouthful. There's a little booklet that spells it all out – A Season of Discernment.

The PUP Task Force sought a different way forward. We attempted to move the church away from constant battles over ordination standards by recommending not changing the existing standards, including the controversial G60106b, the Fidelity and Chastity Amendment, and at the same time honoring the principle that primary decision making on ordination is to be made by churches and presbyteries. Decisions concerning ordination had been made at the local church and presbytery prior to the Kenyon Decision of 1974, and individuals were allowed to exercise their freedom of conscience by scrupling on what they viewed as non-essential tenets in the constitution. Each dissenting candidate's ordination was considered on a case by case basis. Some were approved; others were not. The PUP Task Force proposed moving back to that time-honored system, which had worked well for us for 200 years.

Many of my conservative colleagues disliked the PUP report because they believed it led to local option on ordination. I remember attending the national meeting of the Presbyterian Coalition soon after the PUP report was made public and having some of my evangelical brothers and sisters take me to task, to say the least. I thought many would view me as a hero since I and the other conservatives on the task force had been able to get the task force to agree to hold onto the Fidelity and Chastity Amendment, but many conservatives were unhappy. Most, however, in the liberal or progressive wing of the church hailed PUP as a marvelous way to move forward. The majority of the 2006 General Assembly agreed, and our recommendations were approved as an authoritative interpretation. People viewed the PUP recommendation as a new way to do church – and to stay united yet holding to our differences.

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That brings me to the issue now before the presbyteries, which is the recommended removal of the Fidelity and Chastity Amendment by the 219th General Assembly. The motion before the presbyteries is to once again draw swords and engage in battle on the ordination standard known as G60106b. What is especially troubling to me about this latest attempt to remove the Fidelity and Chastity Amendment from the Book of Order is that it's being led by many of the same progressives who just four years ago hailed the PUP report as a wonderful way to move forward together.

It seems unfair to me to welcome a different way forward, but a few years later turn your back on it. The argument given may be that no non-celibate gay or lesbian person has yet been ordained under the PUP authoritative interpretation. That is true, but I think all of us are aware that our Presbyterian system of checks and balances works slowly and carefully. It is possible and probable that ordinations may occur in the near future. We've seen from reading Outlook and other publications recently that a couple of these, Scott Anderson and Lisa Larges, are moving forward. The plan is for each ordination to be considered individually and be based on the time-honored system of scrupling. I see this compromise as the only way to resolve our present crisis of drawing up battle lines over the Fidelity and Chastity Amendment every two years and deepening the divide between us. I encourage our presbyteries to leave the present standards in place and to permit scrupling on a case by case basis.

The new overture from General Assembly states, "Standards for ordained service reflect the church's desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life. The governing body responsible for ordination and/or installation shall examine each candidate's calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability for the responsibilities of office. 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. Governing bodies shall be guided by scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates."

Most of us have no argument with what that says. The amendment is well thought out. Submitting to Jesus Christ brings joy. My liberal and progressive friends have done their homework well. I think it's the best attempt yet to overturn the Fidelity and Chastity Amendment. But the problem is what this amendment does not say. It does not say, "Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness." Therein lies the rub. Those of us who are evangelicals believe that the new amendment removes an important constitutional standard on sexual purity and morality, a standard based on scripture that is extremely important to us, and such action is therefore unacceptable. If that standard is removed, many evangelicals and conservatives may come to the conclusion that the denomination has crossed an important boundary and abandoned moral truth and biblical principles. Some may depart the Presbyterian Church USA and, in fact, about 100 churches in the last four years have either left or are in the process of leaving. I mourn the loss of each one. I fear that many others will do so if G60106b is removed. Others will stay and gear up for the next General Assembly battle which may be to fight for a

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separate Synod within the Presbyterian Church where fidelity and chastity is still a standard. Or to fight for the dissolution of the Presbyterian Church as we know it, and the establishment of two separate entities united by our mission, pension plan, and foundation. In either case, PUP will have been abandoned and I fear that all hope for unity in the PCUSA will have been lost.

As a former member of the Peace, Unity, and Purity Task Force, I ask the presbytery commissioners to reject the new overture from General Assembly, retain the present standards, permit scrupling on non-essential tenants, and continue the PUP experiment. Let's honestly see if there's some way our diverse denomination can move forward together and model a new way of being the people of God to a polarized nation and world. I do not believe that PUP has been given enough of a chance. Let's give PUP time to work, and help keep us together in the PCUSA.

Thank you very much.