

Neil Morgan  
May 15, 2011

### What Amendment 10-A Means for Covenant Presbyterian

On May 10, when Twin Cities Presbytery approved Amendment 10-A, it brought to a majority the number of the denomination's Presbyteries voting in favor and therefore sealed its approval and inclusion in the Book of Order. The meaning of this has been characterized in headlines by both our denominational news outlets and the popular press as "opening the door for the ordination of sexually active gays and lesbians." With this note, I hope we can dig below the headlines and recognize that 10-A is about much more than the full inclusion of gay and lesbian Presbyterians; that we can take a reasonable approach to the claims of biblical authority on both sides of the debate; that we can decide how or if this will change the way we discern a call to ordained ministry as Elder, Deacon, or Minister of Word and Sacrament in the people of our congregation.

Amendment 10-A will replace the paragraph added to the Book of Order in 1997, G-6.0106-b, which reads:

*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 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.*

Criticism of the above wording from the time of its proposal came from people who disagree with its prohibition of ordination of gay and lesbian people in a committed relationship; but, it came from many others as well. One of the most vociferous objections to Amendment B is that it created a dangerous precedent of micromanagement of the ordination process from the top down. Historically, the right of a congregation to elect its elders without interference from higher governing bodies has been untouchable. Amendment B created an intrusion into that process.

Another objection to Amendment B is the use of the word "obedience" relative to Scripture instead of Jesus Christ. To many theologians, obedience to Scripture rather than obedience to the One God to whom Scripture points is a form of idolatry. To say that Scripture is the "unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ" is not the same thing as requiring obedience to it. Our obedience as Christians is to God alone revealed in the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ. The idea of obedience to Scripture rather than God puts

the written word on the same level as the Word made flesh. While I do not have room to elaborate this completely here, suffice it to say that this creates all kinds of problems for those who worship a living God.

A third objection to Amendment B had to do with the barrier to ordination for anyone who refused to repent of “any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin.” The confessions, as historical documents that reflect the concerns of their time, call an awful lot of things “sin” that we no longer worry about: playing card games, allowing women to baptize children, sharing in worship with Roman Catholics, or charging interest on a loan. Including such a general prohibition in the Book of Order inserted a glaring inconsistency that undermined its own authority.

A fourth objection to Amendment B is that it implied, but did not require, that a nominating committee would inquire into the sex lives of people being considered for ordination and installation as elder. The phrase “self-acknowledged” creates more problems than the one it attempts to address. Did it mean that a nominating committee need not ask about “fidelity and chastity,” but if information was volunteered, the committee should investigate? Or did it mean that every candidate should be given an opportunity to “self-acknowledge” activities the confessions call sin? If so, should only fidelity and chastity be included on the list, or should the nominating committee require that each nominee read the confessions completely before answering the call to serve? Or, should the nominating committee provide a checklist of activities the confessions call sin? The implications for nominating committees have created considerable confusion.

Next, let’s look at the issue of biblical authority and sexual practice.

Amendment A, which has now been approved by a majority of Presbyteries, reads:

*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.***

For some Presbyterians who opposed Amendment A, the fidelity and chastity requirement of the previous language in Amendment B is a matter of biblical authority. If the Bible is authoritative, the argument is made, then the church must abide by the clear meaning of Scripture and prevent the ordination of single people, straight or gay, who are, or are likely to become, sexually active before marriage. The implication (or accusation) is that those who disagree do not consider the Bible authoritative.

That, however, is not what the proponents of Amendment A have argued. Instead, we have argued that the Bible *is* authoritative, but that is not the same thing as saying that the Bible is to be read literally. When biblical texts about relationships and human sexuality are read in their historical context, it is not at all clear to us that the Book of Order should prohibit a Presbytery or congregation from ordaining gay or lesbian people in committed partnerships or married in the eyes of the civil law.

A better biblical case could be made against my own ordination, since I have been divorced and remarried; or, against the ordination of women. (Luke 16:18 and parallels, 1 Timothy 3:2, 12; 1 Timothy 2:12). And, if we read the Bible literally, without taking historical context into account, we would have to advocate slavery (Ephesians 6:5 and many other New Testament texts read, “Slaves, obey your masters.”)

From the holiness code in Leviticus to Song of Solomon to the letters of Paul and the Gospels, the Bible’s many references to human sexuality are complex, contradictory, and deeply influenced by the cultural conditions of the different times and places in which they were written. Those of us who look to the Bible for guidance in sexual ethics will find ourselves engaged in a difficult, vigorous, and intellectually challenging journey.

I believe it is a journey worth taking.

There are some on both sides of today’s issue in the Church who have abdicated the process of discernment. Some say, “I understand the clear sense of Scripture, I don’t need to engage in historical or scholarly study – that’s just a way for people to rationalize their culturally-conditioned point of view.” Others say, “The texts were written long ago without the benefit of modern science; who needs a bunch of dusty old moralistic pre-scientific books to teach us about sex?” (As if nobody knew anything about sex before the Kinsey report.)

When a community of faith engages in a deep study of scripture together, not everybody comes out in perfect agreement. Interpretation is hard. This side of the Kingdom of God, we will all be wrong about some things at some time. The quest for certainty always falls short. The study of Scripture is difficult and offers no guarantees that when we study together it will lead to unity. We know it will not yield uniformity of belief. And yet, the study of Scripture in community stands at the center of our quest to grow in faith.

In the years ahead, I expect to see the Presbyterian Church’s preoccupation with gay and lesbian ordination go the way of previous generations’ preoccupation with divorced and remarried church officers, the ordination of women, miscegenation, and the support of slavery. All of those things were seen in their time as linchpins of the Bible’s authority. Most Presbyterians today, however, see those

issues as prejudices of the past and see their transformation as a sign of the Holy Spirit alive in the church calling forth gifts from people and places previously untapped. The great majority of Presbyterians under 40 years old see the barriers to ordination of gay and lesbian people in committed partnerships in the same light.

That does not mean that the Bible is less authoritative.

It does mean that the church will need to engage in deep and honest study of the Bible as we discern how the Spirit is guiding us all to treat our sexuality as a precious gift to be used wisely, joyfully, and responsibly; and how to utilize the leadership gifts of all kinds of sinners, gay and straight, married, divorced, widowed, and single.

It does mean, if we are serious about electing, ordaining, and installing leaders who are called by God to serve the church, that we elect members to the nominating committee and the session who are faithful students of the Bible, engaged in intentional faith development and study of the Scriptures with others. It means that those who are to be ordained will be thoroughly prepared to answer the ordination and installation questions with integrity; will be gifted and committed to serve in the office to which they will be installed; and will live in ways that “reflect joyful submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life.”