

# Opening Presentation *contra* Amendment 10-A

*by Robert Austell to the Presbytery of Charlotte  
as the second part of a pro/con presentation to presbytery on May 15, 2011.*

My first direct encounter with homosexuality was about 10 years ago when one of the kids in my youth group came out to me. Most of my thoughts on same-sex attraction at that point were just that – thoughts. But suddenly I was face to face with a hurting, yearning 16-year old who really felt untethered and hopeless. And, as it turns out, this was not just any kid in the youth group, but one I was particularly close to, having journeyed together with her through the death of a parent, a life-threatening illness, and more. I had no speech prepared (thankfully!) and didn't have any easy answers.

Here's what came first out of my mouth... actually, first I hugged her. Then I said, "I want you to know that I love you and nothing you have done or ever will do, or what you've just told me, will ever change that. Period." And she received that as true and real because I had lived it out for five years as her youth pastor. And then after a moment I said, "I don't believe this is God's best for you, but know that I will not turn away from you." And she nodded and received that as true... because she knew I loved her and would only speak the very best I knew how into her life.

I talk to her regularly – in many ways she is a daughter to me. And I called her last week to ask her about that particular conversation. I asked permission to share it with you and I asked her to tell me about it from her perspective. She doesn't have God or life or relationships all figured out yet, but then neither do I. ☺ She said that I was one of only two people who ever told her both those things – that God loved her and that God had more for her than what she could comprehend.

In many ways, that first conversation has been repeated in my life and ministry many, many times. It's happened with young couples who are living together, who visit my church. It's happened with church members who are pushing the bounds in relationships outside their own marriage. It's happened in my own life as I realize how I fall short of God's best. I believe the church is a refuge for sinners, of

whom I am one, and that's God's truth. I also believe that the Church is to be a fountain of deep and radically transforming grace.

Pastors and church leaders should be living testimonies of the Gospel – not perfect, sinless people, but those who understand the truth of their own radical depravity and the profoundly transforming grace of Jesus Christ. And so that raises the question of sin – what constitutes sin and what needs redeeming in a person? Said another way, what is outside the bounds of God's best for us?

## **Boundaries**

Boundaries are good. This past year, all ministers in the presbytery have been required to participate in sexual misconduct boundary training, and that's a good thing. I participated in that training session and thought it was well-done and important. I remember sitting there thinking, "This is exactly why G-6.0106b is so important!" While we don't like to be boxed in, there are good and healthy reasons to have boundaries, *especially* in the area of sexual behavior for pastors and church leaders.

The Bible speaks clearly to sexual boundaries. Lust, force, abuse, and any number of immoral variations are out of God's will and defined as sin. The constant and unwavering witness in the history of church teaching and interpretation for two thousand years has been clear: sex is a GIFT of God, designed and reserved for marriage between a man and a woman. Interpretations of scripture that find support for same gender, single, or extra-marital sexual behavior are at odds with an extreme majority of the Christian tradition and face a significant burden of proof. For example...

Equating the prohibitions of same-gender sex in Leviticus with food or clothing prohibitions is not sufficient. The burden of proof requires that the prohibition of same-gender sex be considered alongside the other sexual expressions prohibited in Leviticus – all of which are marked by being too similar (blood relatives, gender) or too different (animals) rather than the complement that God designed in Creation.

Dismissing the sin of Sodom in Genesis 19 as only being about hospitality is not dealing fully with the biblical witness. There was indeed a sin of hospitality in Sodom, described in Ezekiel 16, but there

was also sexual sin, described in Jude 7 as “gross immorality” and “going after strange flesh.” Sodom cannot be dismissed as having nothing to do with sexual sin.

In the New Testament, homosexual sin is mentioned explicitly at least three times (Romans 1, 1 Corinthians 6, and 1 Timothy 1), and heterosexual sin many more times under the blanket term *porneia* for “sexual immorality.” We need to be serious about the whole category of sexual immorality – there is a biblical boundary! No one is off the hook! There is an extreme burden of proof on those who would say that modern same-gender relationships are so categorically different that the terms don’t apply. Yes, there was Temple prostitution and sexual misuse of slaves, but our modern culture has nothing on ancient Greece or Rome when it comes to anything sexual, including long-term, adult same-sex relationships.

Scripture is consistent and unwavering in setting these boundaries, and I understand them to be godly Truth and part of God’s best for us.

### **Speaking the truth in love...**

I spoke to my young friend about “God’s best” and I believe God’s Word – all of it – is true and grace-filled and God’s very best for all who would trust it.

Consider just one of those New Testament passages I mentioned. In Romans 1, there is a specific description of same-gender sexual sin, but also a number of other sins: greed, envy, murder, deceit, gossip, and more (disobedience to parents!). We all should feel included and convicted! And just in case you don’t in chapter one, then chapter two says you have no excuse for passing judgment on others and not yourself.

The point is *not* that everyone is off the hook because everyone sins. The point, in Romans 3, is that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” and are desperately in need of God’s help. It really misses the point to go back and exclude a modern version of sin as not a part. The point comes in chapter eight. “Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” (8:1) That’s the Gospel!

But like Jesus' words of grace AND truth to the woman caught in adultery in John 8, Romans 8 continues... "For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace..."

That's God's best – not restrictive, limiting, buzz-killing, no-fun rules and regulations; but life and hope, the Good News of Jesus Christ. It's there in the other passages with the sin lists – every time... sin leads to death and God's grace gives us new life.

### **I Commit...**

We ALL need to have a dramatic redirect on how we LIVE OUT grace and truth. Grace cannot be so disconnected from biblical truth that it becomes cheap and meaningless – a free pass that bypasses redemption. Neither can we so disconnect truth from the Gospel – and here I talk to "my people" – that it becomes a battering ram that singles out one group of people and drives people away from the Church and the Gospel... worse yet, to despair. That is the ultimate tragedy for someone called "evangelical." For ever misusing truth in that way, I am profoundly sorry.

I commit before you, as I have with my session and congregation, to work for a Church that is radically inclusive in inviting all people into a living, loving community, to turn from sin and turn to the Good News grace of God in Jesus Christ.

What does a vote against 10-A mean? I believe 'no' means 'no' to putting off grace and truth to another day; 'no' to letting a committee figure it out for you; 'no' to asking a later gathering of presbyters to think through this. I ask you to vote 'no' to signal to one another, to the Committee on Ministry, the Committee on Preparation, and to the community and denomination, that here in the Presbytery of Charlotte, we commit to biblically faithful local standards in the context of a renewed commitment to Gospel-soaked truth lived out in love. Please vote 'no.'