

PRESBYTERY MEETING ON AMMENDMENT 10-A
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Introductory Statement

The question which stands before us today is not simply “Should we support or oppose Amendment 10-A.” It is not merely a question about denominational polity. I believe at its deepest level, it is a question about the nature of Christian love. Both sides, acknowledge and embrace Jesus’ command to love. But we differ deeply on how we define what it means to love. In John 15, Jesus said to his disciples, “Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love; just as I have kept my father’s commandments and abide in his love.” [John 15:9-10]. This verse is important for our discussion today because it reveals something crucial about Christian love; viz., that it comes with *content* from God. In other words, love is not a word whose content and meaning we are free to supply, rather it is formulated in the commandments of God, and incarnated in the person of his Son. Therefore we are not free to love people as we choose, indeed it is impossible to love people this way. We can, and must, love according to the Word of God. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote,

“How, for example, shall we ever attain certainty and confidence in our personal and church activity if we do not stand on solid Biblical ground? It is not our heart that determines our course, but God’s Word. Life together, p. 55.

We are only free to love others as God chooses, and we find the parameters of God’s love stated in his commandments and lived out in Jesus Christ.

For each generation of Christians the capacity to love is clarified by the issues the culture brings to it. Does anyone in this room today doubt that one of the defining issues of our time, beginning in the 1960’s until now, is the issue of the use of our bodies? This is the core issue in all of our debates about euthanasia, the death penalty, abortion, stem cell research, and most especially our sexual practice. The culture more and more is defining our bodies in material and utilitarian terms; we are star dust, randomly developing from a primal soup, our behaviors are biologically determined, and we are accountable only to ourselves for our actions. Whatever “works” is appropriate. Whatever “feels good” is right. Does the gospel of Jesus Christ have anything to say to a culture which sees life this way? Does Christianity have a Word from God about our bodies, and what we are to do with them? In opposition to such cultural trends, the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians,

But the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with him. Flee immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.” [1 Cor. 6:17-20].

The question then becomes, as we speak to the sexual confusion of our culture concerning the hope which is found in Christ, does scripture give us any teaching or pattern about how to glorify God in our body—specifically for our purposes today, in regard to our sexuality? The answer is yes, and it is a consistent pattern.

The consistent biblical portrait of human sexuality envisions relationship between man and woman only, by establishing a complementarity in polarity. This is upheld both in positive portrayal and in negative prohibition. In positive portrayal men and women are literally “made for each other” on every level. The epitome of this is reflected in sexuality which in the Bible is always legitimately expressed in God’s gift of the covenant of marriage. Marriage is celebrated in scripture as an image of God’s relationship to Israel and Christ’s to the Church. Heterosexual marriage is grounded in Genesis, validated in the teaching of Jesus, and affirmed throughout the New Testament. Supporters of the amendment like to say that Jesus said nothing about homosexuality. I would add, neither did he speak to issues of rape, pedophilia, bestiality, polygamy or incest. He didn’t have to. All of them were considered abhorrent in Judaism and Jesus’ silence must be construed as concurrence with this position. When he disagrees with the scribal interpretations of the law, we hear about it loud and clear. Are we really to believe that if Jesus had wanted to change the Jewish teaching on heterosexuality and marriage that he forgot to mention it? In fact, Jesus consistently affirmed the traditional Jewish teaching on sexuality and marriage, and strengthened it throughout his teaching. Thus we see the positive portrayal of human sexual expression in the covenant of marriage between a man and woman as the expressed will of God from Genesis to Revelation.

In terms of prohibition, other sexual relations, outside of the male-female polarity, and outside of the covenant of marriage are uniformly proscribed. Adultery and fornication are routinely condemned. Homosexual activity, is condemned in the strongest of language. In Gen. 19 it is called a “wicked act” confirmed, by the way, in Jude 7 where the sin of Sodom is referred to as a “gross immorality.” Homosexual practice is condemned in the Holiness Code in Lev 18 and 20 where it is called an “abomination.” In Romans 1 Paul speaks of “indecent acts” and in 1 Cor. 6:9 calls the practice of homosexuality a disqualifier from the kingdom of God, and in 1 Tim. 1:10 he says that those who practice homosexuality have become lawless and rebellious. The language could not be stronger nor more consistent. Therefore God has laid down the paradigm for human sexuality in the moral law, both in positive teaching and negative prohibition. Taken together these reflect God’s intended ordering of creation. The world can choose its own path, but those who claim to follow Christ are not free to do so, “We are not our own.” Therefore, we must speak a clear message in an age of sexual confusion. And our message, if it is to be truly loving, and truly redemptive, must not be measured by human definitions of love, but by the Word of God.

We have a section in the Book of Order which upholds a standard of “fidelity in marriage between a man and a woman, and chastity in singleness.” This flows directly from the biblical witness, and is a timely word for the church and culture today about what it means to follow Jesus in our bodies. Let me remind you of how this section got there.

The General Assembly of 1978 provided what it called “definitive guidance “ on the ordination of practicing and avowed homosexuals by stating that “unrepentant homosexual practice does not accord with the requirements set forth for ordination.” The General Assembly of 1993 affirmed this under the heading of “Authoritative Interpretation.” Shortly thereafter, certain churches began ordaining homosexual elders, thus violating the constitution. When concerns were raised, the Advisory committee on the Constitution stated that the PJC could not be forced to uphold the definitive guidance and authoritative interpretation, and stated that if the church wanted them upheld, it would require a constitutional amendment. Thus it was the unconstitutionally proactive churches which forced the issue. In 1997 Amendment B was ratified, the “fidelity-chastity amendment.” Amendment B simply restated the consistent moral teaching of the church universal for the last two-thousand years regarding the covenant of marriage and the prohibition of sexual intercourse outside of marriage, and applied that teaching to the issue of qualifications for office in the church. Thus, in response to the gay activist churches, Amendment B made explicit what was already implicit in the previous definitive guidance and authoritative interpretation. Since that time, there have been 4 efforts to remove this language from the Book of Order, all of which have failed. Today’s Amendment 10-A is the latest in this series.

The effect of approving Amendment 10-A will be to say that the Presbyterian Church (USA) has no sexual standards for its ordained ministries. And this in a time where a moral theology of the body is one of the crucial issues of our time. When our generation asks this most important question: “What is the nature and purpose of my body?” Our answer is “Well, we don’t really know, but we think it is whatever you believe it is, so long as you are loving [you define] and authentic.” This is so far removed from the teaching of the scriptures and two-thousand years of Christian teaching as to be unthinkable. I have just returned from Ethiopia, where I was told that members of the Mekane Yesus church (founded by Lutherans and Presbyterian missionaries, now about 5.3 million strong) are “deeply disturbed” that we are considering this move. They are not alone. Author and lecturer in Middle Eastern New Testament Studies, Dr. Ken Bailey has written,

The Leadership of the Global South is horrified at our accommodation to our culture. They are stunned that we are considering the ordination of practicing homosexuals. [The N.T. and Homosexual Practice, p. 4].

Should we abandon our ordination standards we would tear the Church’s fabric in two directions simultaneously, we would tear ourselves vertically from our 2,000 year history of moral teaching, and we would tear ourselves horizontally from the vast majority of the ecumenical community of worldwide Christians, most especially the Global South.

All of us agree that we are called to love when people fall short of the glory of God, but we can’t do this apart from the Word of God. That is *not* loving. Bonhoeffer reminds us...

“Nothing can be more cruel than the tenderness that consigns another to his sin. Nothing can be more compassionate than the severe rebuke that calls a brother back from the path of sin.” Life Together, p. 107.

The question before us today is whether or not we still have the capacity for *biblical* compassion. It is God, and God alone, who decides how God is glorified. It is God, and God alone, who decides the way in which we are to love. Both God's glorification and the pattern of our love for others are laid down clearly and consistently in scripture. I close with those words powerful and pertinent words from Paul, "You are not your own, you have been bought with a price, therefore glorify God in your body." When the time comes later today, I urge you to vote against Amendment 10-A.