

Muskingum Valley Presbytery

By Tim Thomas

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, it is an honor to speak before you this day and ask that you say “no” to the proposed changes to our ordination standards.

“In its confessions, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) identifies with the affirmations of the Protestant Reformation. The focus of these affirmations is the rediscovery of God’s grace in Jesus Christ as revealed in the Scriptures. The Protestant watchwords—grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone—embody principles of understanding which continue to guide and motivate the people of God in the life of faith as stated in the Book of Order.” Scripture is the means God has provided for us to learn the mind of Christ. Our Confessions uniformly teach that God has given us Scripture as our authority to be obeyed and God gives believers the Holy Spirit to illumine our minds to understand Scripture. The Westminster Confession says, “The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, our salvation, faith, and life, is either **expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture**: The Supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined can be no other but the **Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture**. (6.006, 6.010)

Grace and truth have become the poles for opinion in this matter. It is by grace that we are saved according to Paul in Ephesians 2:8, but Jesus said you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free. Certainly Christ died for the sins of the world. But where do we learn what sin is, and what is God’s answer for our sin? The truth we seek can only be from the Word of God. I cannot believe, as this amendment suggests and as noble as it sounds, that to follow Christ obediently would mean to approve any practice that His Word forbids, as if somehow we had access to the mind and will of Jesus Christ apart from his Word. The proposed changes to the Ordination standards suggest we need a gospel that accepts the world as it is, but does not offer a transformative and liberating vision of what God wants for us. That is a gospel without the cross that is a gospel about Jesus’ welcoming behavior but with no place for his horrific death, no need for a Savior who dies for our brokenness and rises to set us free. God’s truth must undergird the grace and love we show. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said “**Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession...** Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, **grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.**”

This proposed replacement for G-6.0106b states, “standards for ordained office reflect the church’s desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life.” But these “standards” are not defined. What does that Lordship mean in the area of sexual expression? There are no clear standards here. In what the Confession of 1967 calls, “the moral confusion of our time,” the proposed replacement offers no sexual standard. In short this measure neither lines up with the Biblical standards, nor with our historical standards found in the book of Order nor with our confessions. I urge you to defeat this amendment by voting no and upholding the current standards that our Book of Order has for those seeking ordination. Thank you.