

Reflections on the Achtemeier-*Layman* Controversy

by Dr. Robert A. J. Gagnon

Mar. 1, 2005

The recent controversy between *The Layman's* Executive Editor Parker Williamson (go [here](#) and [here](#)) and [Mark Achtemeier](#) (a professor of theology at Dubuque Theological Seminary) has focused in large part around whether Prof. Achtemeier “told a seminary class . . . that his position on homosexuality represented a departure from the biblical tradition.” This focus is misplaced and reminds me of another story.

On Oct. 14, 2004, *The Layman* came out with an article entitled [“Draft paper suggests possibility of ordaining ‘committed’ gays.”](#) It described ten theses produced for the Task Force by William Stacy Johnson, a professor of theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, and the discussion that followed. The theses advocated the church’s acceptance of committed homosexual relationships. At one point in the discussion there was an interesting exchange between Prof. Johnson and Rev. John “Mike” Loudon, another member of the Task Force:

“We’re not advocating promiscuity” [Johnson said.]

But, Loudon replied, “There are only two views: Biblical and non-Biblical.”

“Isn’t that just the difference in interpretation?” Johnson asked. “You’re not saying that those on the other side have non-Biblical views, are you?”

Loudon did not answer.

I suspect that Rev. Loudon did not answer Prof. Johnson directly partly because of the social awkwardness of the moment and partly because of the intimidation factor of facing a Task Force that would have expressed outrage at a “Yes” answer.

Yet this question will continue to be put to those who uphold an other-sex prerequisite for valid sexual unions, as proponents of committed homosexual relationships insist that they are being “biblical” in the “deepest” sense. And the answer to that question must be a compassionate but unequivocal:

Yes, your views on this issue are “non-biblical.” Scripture itself establishes clearly that support of any homosexual practice, committed or otherwise, is an extreme non-biblical view. I would be doing you an injustice if I deluded you into thinking otherwise.

This is a major point of my work on the subject. The scriptural witness for maintaining an other-sex prerequisite is pervasive within and across Testaments, strong, absolute, and countercultural. Moreover, no compelling historical reasons exist for assuming that

falsely called “new knowledge” about homosexual orientation or non-exploitative homosexual relationships would have changed the views of Scripture’s authors. Whether one agrees with Scripture’s witness against homosexual practice or not, one cannot say, reasonably, historically, that Scripture has any other witness, nor that a two-sex requirement for sexual relations was merely of marginal concern to the Bible’s authors.

Now, what are we to make of Prof. Achtemeier’s [response](#) to *The Layman* and the subsequent uproar against *The Layman* registered in letters to both [Presbyweb](#) (Feb. 9-12) and [The Layman](#) (Feb. 9-15)?

I was heartened by Mark’s insistence that he “could not in good conscience hold to any position that contradicted biblical teaching.” But I was equally disheartened that, although “categorically” denying that he referred to his views on homosexuality as a “departure from the biblical tradition,” he left undenied the two most damaging allegations:

He said that he was unwilling to say that homosexual behavior is either a sin or not a sin.

He said he has come to the conclusion that the church needs to support homosexuals who commit themselves to monogamous relationships.

The absence of a denial of these two allegations, which incidentally was also pointed out by Parker Williamson [in his rejoinder](#), was a glaring omission in view of the strongly worded refutations that Mark gave for each of the four other, lesser allegations made in *The Layman* article (there were only six allegations total).

Why is this a problem? Mark’s key insistence in his response is that he is “absolutely bound to the authority of Scripture.” Yet such an insistence is meaningless, at least as regards core values in sexual ethics, if one is “unwilling to say” that homosexual behavior is a significant violation of God’s sexual standards or if one “concludes” that the church should offer support for committed homosexual relationships.

The real issue is not whether persons *admit* that they have denied Scripture at significant points but whether *in fact* they have. Remember Stacy Johnson’s challenge: “You’re not saying that those on the other side have non-Biblical views, are you?” Well, if the church weren’t saying that, then we might as well endorse the Covenant Network’s program, an action that would represent an obvious departure from a foundational value in Scripture’s sexual ethics.

Many of the letters that vehemently attacked *The Layman* for its article were premised on the conviction that Prof. Achtemeier could not possibly entertain the views attributed to him, since in previous writings he had shown himself to be a defender of Scripture’s authority. Indeed, many of those who reacted strongly seemed to assume that the article occurred in a vacuum, without any prior history that might suggest a shift in Mark’s views.

Yet indications of a shift in Mark's views had been publicly evident for some time. For example:

1. Already in a 2002 speech at a national Confessing Churches meeting, Mark stated categorically that it would be “an unfaithful and ungodly and unscriptural and unholy *application*” of the Bible’s teaching on sexual holiness to entertain any church discipline for continual, self-affirming acts of homosexual practice. He even compared engaging in homosexual behavior, regularly and unrepentantly, to owning two cars. Can anyone imagine making similar criticisms of Paul’s recommendation of disciplinary actions in the comparable case of the incestuous man in 1 Corinthians 5?
2. In the October 2003 PUP Task Force meeting that discussed papers on the Bible and homosexuality, virtually every statement of Mark’s reported by [The Presbyterian News Service](#), [Presbyterian Outlook](#), and [Presbyterian Layman](#) suggests criticism of what Mark would [later](#) call “a slam-door, firmly articulated ‘no’” to homosexual practice clung to by a certain “constituency” of the PCUSA. For example, he assessed the case for sexual complementarity as “very slippery”; questioned “What is [a homosexual person] able to repent of?”; implied that homosexual orientation, if innate, may be part of God’s “creation”; characterized “the heart of marriage” merely as “covenant faithfulness” (rather than, say, a reunion of a man and woman into a sexual whole); and classified appeals to explicit texts such as Rom 1:24-27 as an “enormously vulnerable” “proof-texting approach,” even when done in the context of a broader discussion of creation and social-scientific evidence.
3. Later Mark was a major contributor to, and avid supporter of, the Task Force’s Preliminary Report to the 2004 General Assembly. [As I have noted elsewhere](#), this Report seriously distorted the interrelationship of the themes of unity and sexual purity in Ephesians. It even flatly declared that Presbyterians “cannot even entertain the notion of severing [institutional] ties [in the PCUSA] with sisters and brothers in Christ” over the homosexuality issue “without also placing themselves in severe jeopardy of being severed from Christ himself.”

There is much else that could be said about hints of a shift in Mark’s position but the above references are sufficient to show that there is a context for this article that has generated a firestorm within renewal circles. Nobody in the renewal movement of the PCUSA has pushed Mark into making the kinds of statements, public and private, over a two-year period that have led some of his friends to wonder about his views on Scripture and homosexuality. His past remarks have lent an unfortunate air of plausibility to the allegations made by some of his students.

At the same time, even if the allegations were true, we have hope for better things in the future for someone who has manifested in previous writings a concern for Scripture’s defining place in the life of the church. Exploratory positions might not harden into settled convictions.

Three other “red herrings” can be identified in this controversy:

1. *The real issue is the timing of the article.* Most critics of the article assume that had *The Layman* just waited longer before publication Mark might have set the record straight on the two key allegations noted above. But there is little reason to make such an assumption. When Mark issued his demand for a retraction he had an opportunity to refute these allegations but chose not to. Nor did he complain that *The Layman* had given him insufficient time to answer their repeated inquiries (six phone calls in seven days with an acknowledgement on his spouse’s part that he had received the messages). Mark didn’t respond to *The Layman* because he has little regard for *The Layman* and did not want to feed into what he pejoratively perceives as *The Layman*’s self-appointed role as Grand Inquisitor of the PCUSA. Perhaps, too, there may have been some fire behind the smoke, some truth behind the allegations that Mark could not have explained to supporters.
2. *The real issue is academic freedom.* Contrary to what some have suggested, including at Dubuque, there is no question here of Mark’s “academic freedom” being put in jeopardy by the article. *The Layman* doesn’t have that kind of clout in PCUSA seminaries. The only damage that such an article might have on Mark is on Mark’s standing with the renewal movement of the PCUSA. And it could have such an effect only if Mark chose not to deny, or not to explain adequately, the two key allegations made in the article that he has yet to challenge; or, worse, if Mark should support a Task Force proposal to gut the church’s historic and scriptural stance on sexuality.
3. *The real issue is trust in the classroom.* As a faculty member myself, I can well understand Mark’s feeling of betrayal at students reporting what he said in a classroom setting to a news service. At the same time I can’t say that I would criticize a news service, or student informers, if a report appeared about a PCUSA seminary faculty member promoting committed “threesomes” or adult incestuous unions. And yet, from Scripture’s perspective, an other-sex prerequisite is even more foundational for sexual ethics than monogamy or a certain amount of blood unrelatedness. The only reason why Mark’s comments to his seminary class were at all newsworthy is that Mark has played, and is playing, an important role in the renewal movement in the PCUSA and, so many thought, in representing the values of that movement to the Task Force. It will certainly do Dubuque Seminary no good to engage in a witch hunt of, or punish, students who contacted *The Layman*. Nor will it help Dubuque’s fundraising to give an impression to renewal circles in the PCUSA that they are more concerned about plugging leaks than maintaining the priority of Scripture in sexual ethics.

Focusing the controversy on timing, academic freedom, or trust in the classroom all deflect from the real issue: Is a trusted leader of renewal in the PCUSA in transition to a view on homosexual practice more in keeping with the Covenant Network than with Presbyterians for Renewal? And, if so, what effects will this have on the Task Force’s final report, the church’s decision on sexual ethics, and this leader’s long-term influence

in the renewal movement? These are legitimate questions and concerns. Angry denunciations of the questions and concerns will not sweep them away.

Whatever Mark's views on homosexual practice currently are, I believe that it is in Mark's best interest to be a bit more candid to his supporters about where he stands, even if his response is only: I haven't made up my mind if committed homosexual unions are sinful or, even if sinful, undeserving of church support as an alternative to promiscuity or abstinence. Currently Mark is allowing people to defend him on the assumptions that he (1) firmly subscribes to Scripture's opposition to all homosexual practice and (2) had every intention of calling *The Layman* back to set the record straight before publication. If it turned out that Mark allowed people to make a vociferous attack on his behalf that was based on premises that he knew to be false, it would not speak well of him.

If, too, his views are still in flux, does that mean that, contrary to one of the allegations, he has not "*come to the conclusion* that the church needs to support homosexuals who commit themselves to monogamous relationships"? Or is it possible that at least some of his views on the issue are already relatively fixed? At least one would be his view that official ecclesiastical endorsement of homosexual unions and ordination of persons in such unions cannot be church-dividing issues.

In the interests of full disclosure, let me say that I shared a penultimate version of these reflections with Mark in the hope that he might take the initiative in clarifying these matters, thus making the publication of these reflections unnecessary. He declined to discuss the matter with me.

In closing, it is my great hope and the hope of many that Mark will maintain his compassion for persons experiencing homosexual desire precisely in the context of firmly upholding Scripture's core stance on marriage and sexual intimacy. That is the only context in which true love, truth in love, can be exercised. Jesus wedded compassion for sexual and economic offenders with an intensified ethic, an aggressive outreach to the lost with a call to his followers to take up their crosses, deny themselves, and lose their lives. Mark is a good man, with great talents, a nice sense of humor, and wonderful zeal for the church. If anyone, including myself, has erred in putting undue pressure on Mark or not giving Mark the space that he needs to sort things out in his own mind, then may Mark forgive. But in forgiving, may he also acknowledge why so many of his friends are concerned and why we will be grieved if we discover that he has transitioned from the scriptural view on human sexuality to one that is not.

**For Dr. Achtemeier's "Response to Robert Gagnon" go [here](#) (Presbyweb) or [here](#) (*The Layman*)
For my "Reply to Mark Achtemeier" go [here](#).**

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