

# **“I Am of the Middle”: The Subgroup of the “Middle” and Its Accommodation to Sexual Immorality**

## **A Response to Mark Achtemeier**

**by Robert A. J. Gagnon, Ph.D.**

July 12, 2006

At the “Hope of the Church” conference held July 5-8 at Montreat Conference Center, Prof. Mark Achtemeier of Dubuque Seminary likened significant attachment to renewal groups\* that affirm Scripture’s two-sex requirement for sexual relations (Presbyterian Coalition, Presbyterians for Renewal, etc.) to the divisions going on in the church at Corinth: “Each of you says, ‘I am of Paul,’ and ‘I am of Apollos,’ and ‘I am of Cephas,’ and ‘I am of Christ.’ Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized into the name of Paul?” (1 Cor 1:12-13). According to Achtemeier, Paul launched a sustained attack in 1 Cor 1-4 precisely against such a “church of the subgroups” (see the [reporting of Prof. Achtemeier’s remarks](#) at [www.layman.org](http://www.layman.org)).

\**Note:* Prof. Achtemeier also includes organizations such as the Covenant Network and Witherspoon Society in his critique. Since they advocate a stance on homosexual practice that Paul strongly rejected in 1 Corinthians and elsewhere, Prof. Achtemeier’s remarks concerning them would be at least partly apropos, though understated.

**There are insurmountable problems with Prof. Achtemeier’s attempted analogy between what was going on in Corinth and what is going on today in the PCUSA.**

**1. *It overlooks the fact that Paul would never have tolerated serial, unrepentant sexual immorality.*** It is not likely that the apostle Paul would have agreed with Prof. Achtemeier’s exegesis and application of his own letter since Paul did not agree that homosexual practice was a matter of relative indifference that could be tolerated among members of the church, let alone among its leadership.

Indeed, similar to the case of the incestuous man in 1 Corinthians 5, *Paul would have been the first to denounce Prof. Achtemeier and the other members of the Task Force for attempting to make it possible for the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. to condone serial and unrepentant sexual immorality in its midst*, not only among its members but even among its leaders. Paul’s view of homosexual practice is clear. He regarded it as a severe instance of sexual immorality, a serious affront to God’s creation of male and female as embodied sexual other-halves revealed in both Scripture and nature (Gen 1:27; 2:24; Lev 18:22; 20:13; Rom 1:24-27; 1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10, among many other texts, indeed, the whole fabric of Scripture’s witness on marriage). Historical and literary context suggest that he regarded homosexual practice as comparable to, or worse than, consensual incest between a man and his mother (1 Cor 5:9-11; 6:9-10). And we know that *on such matters Paul did not advocate mutual forbearance, contrary to what the PUP Task Force and 57% of the General Assembly have advocated.*

Paul could criticize the subgroups at Corinth because they crystallized around matters of relative indifference: dietary and calendar practices (“of Cephas”); esoteric knowledge of heavenly mysteries, allegorical exegesis of Scripture, and speaking in tongues (“of Apollos”); possibly even insistence that only the direct words of Jesus (and not apostolic testimony) be accepted as authoritative (“of Christ”). To compare such matters to tolerating sexual immorality in the church’s midst is a classic instance of eisegesis.

**2. It overlooks the fact that denominations are already subgroups.** Prof. Achtemeier doesn’t seem to realize that the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. is already one of the “subgroups” of the church. It is the same blind spot in his reasoning that got him into trouble previously for warning in the Task Force’s [Preliminary Report](#) that no one leave the PCUSA over the homosexuality issue because “Christians cannot even entertain the notion of severing their ties with sisters and brothers in Christ without also placing themselves in severe jeopardy of being severed from Christ himself” (p. 4). The more zealous Prof. Achtemeier is for maintaining a sociological unity in the PCUSA, at the expense of serious issues involving sexual morality, the more sectarian and exclusivist he appears to become in relation to the church universal. This leads us to our next point.

**3. It overlooks the primary responsibility borne by the Task Force and the GA for schism.** Prof. Achtemeier appears not to realize that *he and the PUP Task Force generally, by promoting a position of forbearance on homosexual practice for officers of the church, have threatened to marginalize the PCUSA, thereby exacerbating its subgroup status, in relation to (1) Scripture, (2) the historic Christian witness, (3) worldwide Christianity, and (4) even the members of the PCUSA, the overwhelming majority of whom do not want to see the PCUSA condone the ordination of persons actively engaged in self-affirmed homosexual acts.*

The PUP Task Force and 57% of the normally left-of-center General Assembly were determined not to allow the presbyteries a vote on the Task Force’s proposal, even though the effect of their “authoritative interpretation” was to amend the Constitution of the PCUSA. Task Force members repeatedly urged, and a slight majority of the plenary ultimately concurred, that their recommendation not be referred to the presbyteries for advice (let alone consent). They knew that they couldn’t have mustered a majority vote for their “authoritative interpretation” among the presbyteries. This is working for unity and consensus?

*In this they showed that they knew themselves to be a minority subgroup within the PCUSA that would have to coerce the majority in order to get their subgroup proposal implemented. Prof. Achtemeier now has the temerity to refer to those who organize to uphold Scripture’s strong two-sex requirement for sexual relations as potentially divisive and harmful subgroups, when in fact it is Prof. Achtemeier and others favorable to the ordination of homosexually active persons who are constituting themselves as a divisive and harmful subgroup within the church. In violating the clear command of Scripture and circumventing the clear words of the Constitution (specifically are regards [the obviously essential character of the sexuality standard in G-6.0106b](#)), it is this subgroup that is acting in potentially schismatic ways.*

**4. It overlooks the dangers in associating oneself with an alleged “middle” that is willing to accommodate sexual immorality.** In reminding his audience of the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity, Prof. Achtemeier seemed not to notice the pervasive influence of sin on those like himself, who falsely claim to represent the “middle” of the church. While chastising “subgroups” for arrogance, boasting, putdowns, and conflict, Prof. Achtemeier appeared to be guilty of doing precisely this in attacking the renewal movement of the PCUSA and in promoting a divisive proposal that is patently unconstitutional and threatens to alienate the denomination from Christ’s lordship over our sexual lives.

*The disease of “middleitist” (pronounced middle-EYE-tist) has infected many of the PCUSA’s leaders, an often vain desire to be in a self-perceived sociological (not Christological) middle of a denominational “elite.” This desire threatens to supplant faithfulness to the radical call of discipleship that Jesus lovingly demanded of his followers. Middleitis is ever in danger of lapsing into sin because it can cloak a desire to have power and be esteemed by the powerful in the pretended garb of unity while losing sight of the fact that Christ and his will for our lives is the only valid middle. (What is the “middle” in Paul’s dispute with the Corinthian church over the case of the incestuous man in 1 Cor 5?)*

As Paul made clear in 1 Cor 5-7--the center section on sexuality in 1 Corinthians that Prof. Achtemeier avoids, similar to the [Task Force’s flawed “exegesis”](#) of the unity/purity theme in Ephesians in their Preliminary Report--*the cross of Christ calls us to a life of co-crucifixion with Christ, especially in our sexual lives.* This is why Paul commands the Corinthian believers to stop comparing a case of sexual immorality to disagreements over food laws and to start “glorifying God” in their sexual behavior. The Corinthian believers, Paul declares, must recognize that they do not belong to themselves but to God who bought them with the precious price of Christ’s death (6:12-20). Instead of requiring members and even officers to “flee sexual immorality,” Prof. Achtemeier wants us to accommodate to sexual immorality.

Achtemeier quotes 1 Cor 3:21, “all things are yours,” then adds: “The pressure is off, there’s no need to be afraid.” Embrace the diversity of church on sexual matters or, at least, trust God to sort it out. Don’t feel like you have to enforce standards. Paul himself didn’t take Prof. Achtemeier’s advice in the case of incest in 1 Cor 5, a case that Paul likened to adultery, same-sex intercourse, sex with prostitutes, and fornication (1 Cor 5-7). In context, “all things are yours” refers to church leaders who are not accommodating sexual immorality (Paul, Apollos, Cephas) and to the blessings of the Christian life. Embracing or even just tolerating the actions of the incestuous man (or the actions of persons engaged in same-sex intercourse and adultery, 6:9) are not among the “all things” that belong to the Corinthians. *Prof. Achtemeier would have done well to compare and contrast “all things are yours” in 3:21 with the Corinthian-like slogan “all things are lawful to me” in 6:12, which Paul repudiates as regards issues of sexual immorality.*

Let it be said, too--in contrast to Prof. Achtemeier’s comment that “there’s no need to be afraid”-- that Paul had a godly fear of what would happen to the church at Corinth and to

the man engaged in unrepentant sexual immorality, should the church at Corinth take no action (1 Cor 5:5-8). If “there’s no need to be afraid” in accommodating to the immorality of homosexual practice, then why should the church stint itself by persisting in fear of committed multiple-partner unions and incest?

According to Achtemeier, “Paul’s confidence as he writes to the Corinthians is that this depressurizing of the ecclesial environment will actually allow us the grace and freedom to deal graciously with those others across the aisle whom Christ also loves.” [Did Paul not deal graciously](#) with the incestuous man and, by implication, with other serial, unrepentant participants in sexual immorality?). If he did, how then can Prof. Achtemeier et al. characterize as ungracious the church’s historic stance against ordaining those in self-affirming sexual relations outside the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman?

The truth is that *Prof. Achtemeier has truncated the gospel definition of grace*, which includes God caring enough about us to turn us *from* self-dishonoring, self-degrading sexual behavior that mars the image of God stamped on our sexual being *to* God-honoring, life-sustaining sexual behavior that enhances that image. Here too Prof. Achtemeier would have done well to compare Rom 1:24-27 with 6:12-23: *Whereas God’s wrath is manifested in giving persons over to the mastery of pre-existing impulses for sexual “uncleanness,” of which impulses for same-sex intercourse are a paradigmatic instance, God’s grace is now manifested in delivering us from the primary lordship of such impulses so that we no longer put our bodies at the disposal of such “uncleanness”* (Rom 1:24; 6:19).

*It is a terrible thing to manipulate the text of Scripture to advance what is essentially an anti-Scriptural agenda. There can never be true Christ-centered unity around the toleration of sexual immorality that would have appalled, and does appall, Jesus.* The church should be about graciously and humbly *recovering* the lost, not training them to be content with their lost condition.

I hope that Prof. Achtemeier will not attribute this essay to “demonizing” him (as he has often referred to the actions of those who disagree with his stance). I am merely calling him to account for exegesis and application of Paul’s remarks in 1 Corinthians that make the text of Scripture say the near-opposite of what it actually says in context; and, too, for promoting a schismatic stance in the church while chastising others for the schism that his actions, and the actions of others, have provoked. He is a Christian brother.

Prof. Achtemeier asks: Was the Presbyterian Coalition crucified for you? I ask Prof. Achtemeier: Was the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. crucified for you?

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