

## **Response to the Pastor of the Pittsburgh Presbytery regarding the Vote to Allow Homosexual Ordination in the Presbyterian Church U.S.A.**

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May 12, 2011

Rev. Sheldon Sorge  
Pastor to the Pittsburgh Presbytery

Dear Sheldon,

This letter is in response to your pastoral letter to the sessions within the Pittsburgh Presbytery, dated May 12, 2011 ([http://pghpresbytery.org/news/sheldon\\_shares/2011/ss\\_051211.htm](http://pghpresbytery.org/news/sheldon_shares/2011/ss_051211.htm)).

I can understand your desire to prevent fracture in the Pittsburgh Presbytery as Pastor to the presbytery. However, I must express my disagreement with your use of Pauline texts to buttress your position that the recent approval of Amendment 10A to the *Book of Order* should occasion no deep soul-searching about staying in the denomination.

I do not say here that Presbyterians faithful to Scripture's strong male-female prerequisite for sexual relations should immediately leave the PCUSA. I only know that your exegesis of Pauline texts on this matter is considerably off the mark and glosses over very serious matters. The denomination's allowance of "adult-committed" homosexual activity among its ordained leadership is at least as morally problematic as if the denomination allowed for "adult-committed" incest or polyamory among its ordained leadership. In ignoring this I feel that you are doing the majority of the presbytery a disservice.

You cite 1 Corinthians 1:13: "Has Christ been divided?" Clearly the focus of most of 1 Corinthians is on church unity. Yet for Paul that overall emphasis on unity did not apply to matters of gross doctrinal error, idolatry, or sexual immorality. It applied only to matters of relative indifference, that is, matters that did not seriously affect entrance into God's kingdom. Paul never would have counseled an "agree to disagree" approach on denial of the resurrection (ch. 15), eating at an idol's temple and flirting with idolatry (ch. 10), or a case of egregious sexual immorality (chs. 5-6).

Indeed, in a letter that deals with numerous problems in the Corinthian community, only at one point does Paul insist that the offender be put out of the community: the case of a believer in an adult-consensual incestuous relationship (ch. 5). The similarity of vice lists in 5:9-11 and 6:9-10 indicates that Paul insisted that the offender be expelled from the community pending repentance (5:9-11) precisely because the offender was at high risk

of being excluded from the kingdom of God (6:9-10). Paul rebuked the leadership at Corinth for being “puffed up,” inflated with pride, as regards their tolerance of such behavior. They should rather have mourned the fate of the incestuous man, as one would mourn at a funeral (5:2).

Given the intensity and outrage of Paul’s reaction, it doesn’t take a great deal of imagination to realize that, had the Corinthian leadership not only ignored Paul’s demand but, even worse, installed the incestuous man as a leader over the Corinthian church, Paul would have come to them with the proverbial “rod” (4:21). Had this not worked there is little doubt that he would have broken ties completely. Otherwise, the rest of Christendom, including the great centers in Jerusalem and Antioch, would have disassociated themselves completely from Paul as being the “libertine” that Judaizers had falsely claimed him to be.

However, Paul would never have let matters get to that point since he took a backseat to no one when it came to opposing sexual immorality. In our first extant Pauline letter, 1 Thessalonians, when Paul got around to moral exhortation in ch. 4, the first thing on his list was to warn against any sexual immorality (4:1-8). He stated clearly that to oppose his commands on sexual purity would be tantamount to a rejection of God that would incur God’s avenging action (4:6-8).

The evidence that Paul not only opposed homosexual practice absolutely, without exceptions for “adult-committed” homosexual relationships, but also regarded it as even worse than adult-committed incestuous or polyamorous unions is, to say the least, overwhelming. The case for asserting that Paul or any other Jew or Christian of the period might have held some openness to committed homosexual unions entered upon by homosexually oriented persons is historically indefensible. Even the top homosexualist scholars today in biblical studies, classics, and church history acknowledge this point.

Claims to “new knowledge” today about homosexuality don’t fly. Committed homosexual relationships were known in the Greco-Roman world, including semi-official marriages between men and between women. We also have Greco-Roman moralists opposing even such committed unions as being unnatural, to say nothing of similar opposition from early rabbinic material and from Church Fathers. There were also widespread theories positing congenital influences on one or more forms of homosexual development. Indeed the idea of an exclusive, innate same-sex attraction for some was acknowledged in many sectors of thought.

To suggest that Paul might have exhorted believers at Corinth to stay in fellowship with a church that installed as leaders persons who were actually engaged in homosexual practice or in incest, whether “adult-committed” or not, is bad revisionist history.

The same considerations apply to your use of the text of Ephesians. You cite Eph 4:2-3 (“bearing with one another in love, being in earnest to maintain the oneness of the Spirit in the bond of peace”) and 2:14-16 (Christ removing the dividing wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile). Paul is quite clear that unity is not to be safeguarded at the

expense of sound doctrine (4:7-16) or moral purity (4:17-5:12). Unity is not something we fit Christ into but something that follows from putting Christ in the supreme place.

The writer of Ephesians insisted that there could be no unity bought at the price of tolerating sexual immorality. He stressed that believers were “no longer [to] walk as the Gentiles walk, . . . who have given themselves to *licentiousness (aselgeia)* for the greedy doing of every *sexual impurity (akatharsia)*” (4:17, 19). In fact, he insisted:

<sup>5:3</sup>*Sexual immorality (porneia) and sexual impurity (akatharsia) of any kind . . . must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. . . .<sup>5</sup>Know this indeed, that every *sexually immoral person ( pornos) or sexually impure person (akathartos)* . . . has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. <sup>6</sup>Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God is coming on the children of disobedience. <sup>7</sup>*So do not become associates of theirs.* <sup>8</sup>For you were once darkness, but now light in the Lord. Walk as children of light. . . . <sup>10</sup>determining what is acceptable to the Lord. <sup>11</sup>And do not be partnering with the unfruitful works of darkness but rather even be exposing/refuting them. <sup>12</sup>For it is shameful even to speak of the things that are done in secret by them.*

You assure us that persons on all sides of the homosexuality issue are “sincerely devoted to biblical authority” and are all alike “committed to the lordship of Jesus Christ and the authority of Scripture.” The Corinthians who tolerated a case of adult-consensual incest in their midst could have claimed the same. But such claims ring hollow when support is given for a form of behavior—among the leadership, no less—that Scripture treats as an instance of egregious sexual immorality.

Your remark that “God’s people dare not let the world set our moral agenda” will strike many of us as ironic. Denominational allowance for homosexual practice is precisely that. You add: “The Bible is clear that many practices the world tolerates and even celebrates – greed, envy, promiscuity, slander, inhospitality, and the like – have no place in the kingdom of God, nor do they have any place in the church.” Exactly the same thing can and should be said about homosexual practice. You even say: “This is a time to be *more* attentive to the call to biblical holiness, not less.” Yet the denomination’s willingness to accept the extreme sexual immorality of homosexual practice among its ordained officers is the opposite of being “attentive to the call to biblical holiness.”

Characterizing soul-searching about the impact of this serious departure from Scripture and holiness on denominational unity as “polarization,” “demonization,” and mere “partisan hostility” is uncharitable and scripturally inaccurate. By the same reasoning, Paul’s response to the case of gross sexual immorality at Corinth in 1 Cor 5 would have to be viewed as an instance of polarization, demonization, and partisan hostility. That makes no sense to me.

Your online title and preface to your letter cites the Bob Dylan line “The times, they are a-changin’” as if the promotion of homosexual immorality in the PCUSA is akin to the civil rights movement of the ’60s. I do not know what your intentions were here but it

comes across as a partisan response inappropriate for a presbytery that this past year (and consistently) voted by a two-thirds majority to retain the ordination standard that sexual activity should be limited to the covenant of marriage between one man and one woman.

I do not wish you to think that I have any hostility to you personally. I do not question the sincerity of your views. I just question them so far as their accuracy in interpreting and applying Scripture is concerned.

Sincerely yours,

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