

The PCUSA: Mission to Culture, or Mirror of Culture?

James R. Edwards
Bruner-Welch Professor of Theology
Whitworth University

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Introduction

My first computer spell-check program did not recognize the verb “to pastor” in a sentence I wrote. It flagged the word and suggested three options, “to pester,” “to posture,” or “to pasture.” Each of those options, curiously, is appropriate to various abuses of our vocation. I do not wish to pursue those abuses but rather, in accordance with Ephesians 4:15, to be a pastor who “speaks the truth in love.”

The Issue

The issue under discussion, debate, and vote today is whether or not to approve or reject Amendment A. Amendment A is in its most comprehensive sense about ordination standards, but its particular relevance is whether or not the PCUSA should, or should not, endorse the ordination of persons as teaching elders, ruling elders, or deacons who affirm and/or practice, same-sex relationships. This single issue has been the most determinative and divisive issue in the PCUSA for the past thirty years, and it is this issue that I wish to address today.

The Biblical Evidence Related to Same-sex Relations

The PCUSA is a member of the Reformed family of churches. As reformed Christians, Presbyterian confessions and polity ascribe to Scripture an authority second to none in Christendom. The Biblical evidence related to the subject of homosexuality is well known to pastors and elders in the PCUSA, and I need not rehearse it all today. Homosexual and lesbian relations in Scripture have been studied, discussed, debated, and written about more than perhaps any single subject in our denomination in the past decades. I have written a comprehensive article on the subject entitled “The Bible and the Practice of Homosexuality,” which has been republished several times by *Theology Matters*. My work on this subject has been echoed and surpassed by many others, including Bruce Metzger, Paul and Elizabeth Achtemeier, Ulrich Mauser, Martin Hengel, Kenneth Bailey, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Richard Hays, and above all, Robert Gagnon’s comprehensive and exhaustive study, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*. The result of all these studies can be summarized by Richard Hays in these words, “Every pertinent Christian text from the pre-Constantian period adopts an unremittingly negative judgment on homosexual practice, and this tradition is emphatically carried forward by all major Christian writers of the fourth and fifth centuries” (“A Response to John Boswell’s Exegesis of Romans 1,” *JRE* 14/1 (1986), 202). Hays actually understates the case. There is no Christian or Jewish text from the Biblical period or patristic period that condones same-sex relations or is even neutral toward them. Every text that discusses the subject judges this form of human sexuality as contrary to God’s intended order for human sexuality. You can be assured of the

truth of this conclusion because the literature in question has been scoured by scholars who seek to provide Biblical and theological justification for same-sex relations, and they have not succeeded in advancing *one* text from the Biblical and post-Biblical period in exception to it. From a Biblical perspective, the case against homosexual practice is irrefutable. Without fail, Biblical and extra-Biblical sources present a univocal witness in condemning the practice of homosexuality. There is no text in Judeo-Christian literature from Genesis to Constantine that condones it.

The Fallacy of Analogical Arguments from Culture

How, then, do scholars and theologians continue to advocate a pro-gay standpoint against this impenetrable headwall of Biblical evidence? They do so, primarily, by adducing what they claim are arguments of analogy from culture. Three issues are commonly cited as evidence: Gentiles, slavery, and women. In a nutshell, proponents of gay ordination argue that the church, *contrary to Scripture*, has changed its thinking regarding the above issues, and that it can—and *should*—change its opposition to homosexual practice as well. All three issues—Gentiles, slavery, and women—are false analogies in relation to gay ordination, and here is why.

- *Gentiles*

Acts 10 is commonly cited as a proof-text of the Gentile analogy. The argument runs as follows: Peter was convinced by the Holy Spirit, in contrast to his Jewish upbringing, to accept Gentiles into full communion of faith. By analogy, the Holy Spirit is testifying through contemporary cultural acceptance of gays and lesbians that the church should drop its opposition to ordination of gays and grant them full participatory rights in ministry. This analogy is flawed on two counts. First, Presbyterians believe that Scripture, not culture, reveals the true intention of God. Second, in Acts 10 Peter is not led to adopt a new stance with regard to Gentiles, but to *rediscover* the rightful place of Gentiles in the history of salvation. The inclusion of Gentiles in salvation history does not begin in Acts 10; it begins with the call to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3, in which *all the nations of the earth* would be blessed by Abraham. The inclusion of Gentiles continues into the earliest prophetic tradition in Elijah and Elisha showing favor to Gentiles, in Second Isaiah advocating inclusion of Gentiles, and in God's leading Jonah to proclaim salvation to Nineveh. Above all, the place of Gentiles in salvation history is assured by Jesus, who in his inaugural sermon at Nazareth cites the acceptance of Gentiles by Elijah and Elisha. It is further affirmed by Jesus' healing of the daughter of a Syrophenician woman, and by his healing of the Gerasene demoniac and sending him as the first missionaries to Gentiles. In Acts 15:16-17 James appeals to this Biblical history as a precedent for the Council of Jerusalem to affirm the Gentile mission. The acceptance of Gentiles by the early church was not a change contrary to Scripture, but a change in *conformity* with Scripture.

- *Slavery*

It is commonly said that the Bible endorses slavery but that the modern world, rightly, rejects slavery, and that the church should also rightly reject opposition to ordination of gays. I do not believe it is entirely truthful to say the Bible *endorses* slavery. Slavery is *accepted* in Scripture as an inevitability, more or less like

many today accept, say, the influence of the military-industrial complex, and the values it generates, in Western society. Even the OT, which accepts slavery, refuses to affirm the most basic element of slavery—that slaves are *chattel*. In the OT slaves remain persons who possess God-given rights, including participation in the *covenant*. In the NT, when Paul says to Philemon that Onesimus, a slave, must be taken back “no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother” (Phlm 16), the ax was laid at the root of slavery. The abolition of slavery in the Christian world was not a change contrary to Scripture, but a change that recovered the inalienable dignity of the human person that derives from the order of creation, as attested in Scripture.

- *Women*

The final analogy relates to the changed status of women in the church as a precedent for a change of opinion and policy related to the practice of homosexuality. This, too, is a false analogy. Scripture does not present a univocal position with regard to women in leadership positions, but it does present a univocal voice against the practice of same-sex relations. With regard to women, the Israelite world did not permit women to be priests, or even participate fully in worship, and yet it also presents women as prophets and military leaders. In the NT the Pastoral Letters are reserved about women in leadership roles, although Jesus himself had women disciples (Luke 8:1-3). Likewise, all four Gospels record that Mary Magdalene was both the first witness of the resurrection and its first evangelist. Priscilla and Phoebe and Lydia are all designated as church leaders, and wives—including the wife of Peter—accompanied their husbands in early Christian missions. It is, of course, true that this early affirmation of women in the church was diminished during late antiquity, the middle ages, and into the modern period, but it is not correct to say that leadership of women in the church today represents a change contrary to Scripture. It represents a rediscovery and recovery of the place of women that is well attested in earliest Christianity.

The issues of Gentiles, slavery, and women are different from the practice of homosexuality in one critical respect: the Biblical record affirms Gentiles, slave persons, and women, whereas it does not affirm the practice of homosexuality. Powerful arguments have been made from Scripture in support of Gentiles, abolition of slavery, and women in ecclesial leadership, but no such argument has been made, or can be made, from Scripture in support of homosexual practice. Modern endorsement of Gentiles, abolition of slavery, and inclusion of women in leadership roles are not *contrary* to Scripture, but a recovery and reaffirmation of positions on all three that are found *within* Scripture. That cannot be said of homosexual practice, which is univocally and universally condemned in Scripture. The “cultural” argument is a false argument. Those who build a case for homosexual practice on its basis perpetrate a fraud against history.

The Real Issue

No one, I maintain, would assert the idea of affirming or ordaining persons who are practicing homosexuals on the basis of either Christian Scripture or Christian tradition. Scripture

is univocal in his opposition to homosexual practice, and I can find no endorsement of homosexual practice in the scholarly Christian tradition until mid- twentieth century. As a case in point, the fifteen-volume *Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (1912; two supplemental volumes, 1955) contains no entry on the subject of “homosexuality” or “lesbianism” (or related terminology). I am aware, of course, that the omission of this subject could be the result of a cultural oversight on the part of the editors. I believe anyone familiar with the scope of *Schaff-Herzog* would be reluctant to accuse this massive theological undertaking of such an oversight, however. The reason homosexual practice is under discussion today is not because the Scriptures or Christian tradition are unclear on the subject, but because modern sexual practices have radically changed. The real issue before us today is not what the Bible says or how it has historically been interpreted, but rather how culture has changed and what the proper response of the church should be to that change. The real issue in our denomination today, as in the past thirty years, is not essentially Biblical and or theological, but ecclesial. It is on this issue that I wish to conclude.

We hear a great deal today about “the end of Christendom.” “Christendom” can be defined as a synthesis of church and state in which the vocation of the church to represent “spiritual” forces and the vocation of the state to represent economic, social, and military forces were understood to form a symbiotic, complementary whole for society. It is not my purpose to argue when, exactly, the long and fruitful experiment of Christendom ended, but to assert, as many of you know better than I, that the above synthesis of church and state is over. The church no longer occupies “most favored nation” status in Western society. It may not (yet) occupy pariah-status, but it certainly no longer occupies privileged-status. We face a new era of the church, and like it or not, it has been given to our generation to begin pioneering a new understanding of church and state, of sacred community and secular society.

The issue of homosexuality is a presenting issue in this new era. The way the PCUSA responds to this particular issue will set a crucial—perhaps even a determinative—precedent for its response to a post-Christendom age. One of the most important new paradigms of church, with which you all are familiar and with which I suspect most of you agree, is the paradigm of *missional* church. In its most basic sense, “missional” means a change of understanding of the church as a custodial institution to an understanding of the church as a prophetic and servant institution. In the Christendom model, the church was a spiritual chaplain within and on behalf of a larger social and cultural network. In a missional model, the church stands outside that larger social and cultural network, and on the basis of its unique identity (not the identity assigned to it by society!) administers the redemptive word of God to its host society. The issue of homosexuality, which is promoted so aggressively in Western culture today, is in one way perhaps a gift of God to the church, a gift that occasions the church today, as in Joshua’s day, to “choose this day whom you will serve, whether the God your ancestors served, or the gods in whose land you are now living” (Josh 24:15). The response of the PCUSA to the issue of homosexuality will determine whether the PCUSA is a missional church to the society in which we now live, or simply a church that mirrors our society. The response of the PCUSA to this issue will determine whether we choose to anchor our identity in the historic Christian faith, and bear witness to that faith in a redemptive, compassionate, and joyful way in our society; or whether we accommodate to the society in hopes of making the church and Christian faith

relevant to it. The church that ceases being a lighthouse and becomes like the fog and darkness around it leaves all vessels at sea in peril.

May I remind you that the church even now maintains a missional stance over against three major shifts in American society in abortion, divorce, and gambling. Each of these three issues is a major factor today, but the church has not been persuaded to *endorse* any of them. I know of no one who says abortion is a moral good; in some circumstances a necessary evil, perhaps, but never a moral good. I know of no one who says divorce is a moral good; in some circumstances a necessary evil, perhaps, but never a moral good. I know of no one who says gambling, now a major supplier of state and local revenues, is a moral good. In all three instances the PCUSA has chosen rightly and wisely not to endorse these activities but to attempt to minister in a redemptive way to people who participate in them. With regard to homosexual practice, the church is being asked today not simply to accept it, but to celebrate it as a gift of God and endorse it for church leaders. The PCUSA cannot endorse in its highest office a behavior that Scripture categorically condemns and remain faithful to its calling.

Allow me to say a word in closing about the temptation of accommodation and relevancy. I have taught for thirty-three years in Presbyterian-related colleges. I know this world quite well, and I know that the residual virus in the bloodstream of our denominational colleges and seminaries is the virus to conform to the larger intellectual ethos of western society by forsaking a confessional status for a postmodern status in which all truths are relative. The temptation before our educational institutions is a mutation of the same temptation before the denomination in the debate over homosexuality, namely, whether we will seek to maintain a majority status by conforming to the culture, or whether we will seek to be faithful to our historic identity, allowing the gospel to declare a life-affirming, transforming, and redemptive witness to the larger society. If we choose to affirm practicing, self-affirmed homosexual persons for ordination we will stand with the emerging culture, and in so doing we will attempt to maintain the old synthesis of Christendom with the church as custodian of culture. But in so doing we will surrender our prophetic voice and our identity. Like the YMCA and any number of former Christian institutions, like most of the heresies in Christian history, we will adapt to a prevailing ethos that is not in accord with the gospel, and in so doing become absorbed into the society that so desperately needs to hear the witness of the gospel.