

## Presbytery Debate on Amendment B in the Presbytery of the James

Feb 21, 2009

I'd like to begin this morning by doing a little repenting. Though I represent the group that is opposing this amendment and believes that homosexual practice is not God's design for human relationships, I want to repent of some ways we have engaged in this debate.

Some of the criticisms that our opponents have against us are, frankly, true. We have not always acknowledged the contextual nature of Scripture and the complexity of biblical interpretation. We have sometimes caricatured people on the other side as those who don't love and use the Bible. We have sometimes narrowly defined sin and overlooked sin in our congregations that the Bible emphatically condemns, including injustice, greed, racism, and unchecked consumption.

But most of all, we have sometimes treated this simply as an "issue" and not acknowledged the experiences of real people for whom sexuality is a profound struggle. Let me say that as someone of the Gen-X generation, this is not simply an "issue" for me. It is something that affects countless peers, colleagues, former classmates, friends and family members. It is honestly quite difficult for me to be here speaking for this reason, because I don't want to simply be "against" something – against my own friends – because I am *for* them, I am for grace, for love, for the inclusion of all people into God's new community through the gospel.

So I begin in a spirit of repentance and humility, confessing that we have not always engaged in this debate in a way that brings glory to Jesus Christ, and with a prayer that whatever the outcome today we might model a spirit of humility and love even in the way we disagree.

So why am I speaking against this amendment? My reasons focus around two main areas. The first is the Bible. Supporters of this amendment are very frank about their hope that it will open the door for practicing homosexual people to be ordained (I appreciate their forthrightness about this motive). To do this would be a dramatic shift from the universal church's historic stance on sexuality and a shift away from the majority global church's view today. So it is imperative that if we move to make this change, we do so with great clarity that this is based on biblical faithfulness and clear discernment of God's will and truth.

After much struggling, I cannot affirm that change. This is the case not simply because of the collection of Bible passages that address the issue of homosexuality outright, but more so because of the broad grain of Scripture, the narrative sweep running from Creation in Genesis 1 through the prophets through Jesus through Paul through Revelation, all of which seem to affirm that God's design for human sexuality is bound in a married relationship between a man and a woman, that that is the form of true sexual freedom.

Even my friends who disagree with me about this often admit the Bible does clearly prohibit homosexuality, but they often say that just as the Holy Spirit led the church away from Scriptural teaching about women and slaves and mono-culturalism in the church, so now the Spirit may be leading us away from the Scriptural teaching about sexuality.

But I cannot see the analogy there.

When the church came to those decisions, I believe it was not because the Spirit led us *away* from Scriptural teaching, but closer *to* it, to a deeper and truer faithfulness to the Scriptures, as we grasped the Biblical vision for the dignity and equality of women, the liberating power of God's Kingdom for the enslaved, and God's design from the very earliest chapters in Genesis to create a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic community. For me personally, the decision my family has made to live and work in a poor inner city neighborhood in Richmond comes from the unavoidable call of Scripture *to* the poor (a call that the church has often overlooked). All of these (women, the poor,

slaves, multi-culturalism) were instances of God opening the door of his church to *people*, not condoning behaviors that were previously prohibited.

I cannot believe, as this amendment suggests and as noble as it sounds, that to follow Christ obediently would mean to approve a practice that his Word forbids, as if we somehow had access to the mind and will of Jesus Christ apart from his Word. As the Barmen declaration states, “Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear... and trust and obey in life and death.” We have no Jesus apart from the one revealed to us in Scripture.

My second concern relates to something almost more fundamental, the gospel itself. What is the gospel? The gospel is about love, grace, inclusion, forgiveness: it is *about* all of those things, but ultimately it isn't any of those things full stop. The gospel is Jesus Christ, who came and fraternized with the forgotten and oppressed, who welcomed sinners, who befriended those who society had marginalized, and who then offered each of those people, as he does for all of us, the possibility of transformation and new life, rescue and renewal from the lives of brokenness we all live, to free us for the kind of life that God designed for us.

This is why the cross is the central symbol of Christianity. The cross says to each of us: “This is how committed God is to your transformation: that God was willing in the person of Jesus Christ to experience the most brutal and forsaken death to deal with your sin and make you new.”

My deep fear about this amendment is this: I fear that it ultimately suggests a gospel that is impotent to deal with people like me: a helpless, broken, selfish sinner. It suggests a gospel that accepts me but makes no promise to change me. It suggests a gospel that welcomes me but has no intent to deal with the profound brokenness in my life. It suggests a gospel that includes me but has no power to set me free from the enslaving addictions and selfish inclinations of my heart. It suggests a Jesus who welcomes and includes but who offers no vision and power for transformation and liberation to newness of life.

Instead, it is a gospel that assumes that the way the world is, is the way the world ought to be. Or worse, it suggests that the way I am now, is the way I ought to be (God forbid!, my wife would say). And that kind of gospel, I want to very modestly suggest, is not the gospel. It is a gospel that accepts me and others and the world as it is, but does not offer a transformative and liberating vision of what God wants me and others and the world to be. And that is a gospel without the cross, a gospel that in the end is about Jesus' welcoming behavior but has no need for his horrific death, no need for a Savior who dies for our brokenness and rises to set us free.

Thank God for a gospel of gracious inclusion! Without that gracious inclusion, I certainly would not be here, nor would any of us. But thank God also for a gospel of power, a gospel of death and resurrection, a gospel that does not simply accept this broken world *as it is* but offers a vision of a transformed world and a possibility for healing, that we might become the people God intends us to be, in all our sexual and social brokenness.

And I mean all of us!

I appeal to you, for the sake of biblical faithfulness, and for the sake of the gospel itself, to vote against the amendment.

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