

Witnessing to Christ's Church: Our Continuing Controversy over Ordination Standards

Introduction

On May 14, 2010, the Presbytery of the Miami Valley overwhelmingly approved an overture to the General Assembly (which became known as 06-20, Fast and Forbearance). ***The overture called for a seven year fast from legislative efforts during a period of active waiting with respect to our continuing ordination standards controversy.***

Despite the overture's defeat at General Assembly, *our presbytery's action* underscored our desire to seek a better way, and by doing so, offered us the opportunity to witness to the whole church by voluntarily living into the proposals of the overture.

Fast and Forbearance

I therefore, a prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

Ephesians 4:1-5, NRSV

Guided by scripture, we:

- Humbly acknowledge that division within the church obscures our witness to Jesus Christ.
- Humbly acknowledge that, regarding the controversy over ordination standards, the Lord has not blessed the church with a unity of conscience, that the church is likely to have a large minority on this issue for the foreseeable future (no matter which side is in majority), and that the church's wrangling has unintentionally drawn us away from behavior readily identifiable as Christ-minded.
- Urge all members and officers to undertake a **seven-year fast**, abstaining from all legislative efforts to resolve the ordination standards controversy, **AND to wait actively upon the Lord by pursuing untried strategies** to resolve the controversy, especially strategies of humility, gentleness, patience and forbearance.

- Urging all officers (deacons, elders, and ministers of the Word and sacrament) to study Ephesians 4 and to apply it with specific voluntary efforts which draw us nearer to behavior readily identifiable as Christ-like.
- Urging all officers in the **majority** (those in favor of G-6.0106b and opposing gay ordination) to approach Presbyterians in the minority with efforts to encourage healing, respect, trust, and transformation.
- Urging all officers in the **minority** (those opposed to G-6.0106b and favoring gay ordination) to approach Presbyterians in the majority with efforts to encourage healing, respect, trust, and transformation.

We seek an even-handed, compassionate way to those on each side of the controversy, asking neither to sacrifice their conscientious convictions and asking each to extend forbearance voluntarily to the other. In this way we hope the church may rise to the Apostle's call to "make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

THEREFORE, the Council of the Presbytery of the Miami Valley, reaffirming the intent of the action taken by the presbytery in its meeting of May 14, 2010, invites all its members to voluntarily live into this earnest desire to seek a different way, refraining from our denomination's continuing legislative efforts regarding ordination standards as we engage in each other in untried strategies of humility, gentleness, patience and forbearance, in light the apostle Paul's call in Ephesians 4.

Rationale

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Division dims Christian unity

As the only chapter of the New Testament using the Greek word translated as *unity*, Ephesians 4 presents a vision for faithful Christian community. It reminds us that the church's unity is both grace and vocation, gift and responsibility. "Church unity is not ours to produce; it is a gift to be received and faithfully displayed, as public testimony that God in Christ is indeed with us. Yet, while the church's unity is not ours to produce, we *do* set the tone that nurtures or withers it, illuminates or darkens it, enhances or defaces it, affirms or denies it."¹ The qualities outlined by Paul—humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, and persevering effort for unity—are thus a standard of relationship between Christians, integral to our witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Yet the legacy of the Reformed tradition in the United States is largely one of fragmentation, not unity. We divide over differences in faith, practice, or both. In our dividing, we fall short of glorifying the triune God, described well by Karl Barth in his discussion of the oneness of the church:

A plurality of Churches...means a plurality of lords, a plurality of spirits, a plurality of gods. There is no doubt that to the extent that Christendom does consist of actually different and opposing Churches, to that extent it denies practically what it confesses theoretically—the unity and singularity of God, of Jesus Christ, of the Holy Spirit. There may be good grounds for the rise of these divisions. There may be serious obstacles to their removal. There may be many things which can be said by way of interpretation and mitigation. But this does not alter the fact that every division as such is a deep riddle, a scandal. And in face of this scandal the whole of Christendom should be united in being able to think of it only with penitence, not with the penitence which each expects of the other, but with the penitence in which—whatever may be the cost—each is willing to precede the other.²

The effects of division over ordination standards

The present controversy over ordination standards has tested Presbyterian unity for more than three decades. Most organized efforts to resolve the controversy and maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace have been legislative and judicial. Some of us have sought to clarify and maintain the long tradition within our

¹ "Bearing with One Another: The Pastoral Task in Times of Struggle," Sheldon W. Sorge, PC(USA) Office of Theology and Worship, Church Issues Series, No. 5, p. 4.

² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.1*, tr. G. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 675-676.

constitution and polity prohibiting self-affirming, practicing homosexual persons from ordination. Some of us have sought to revise these standards to permit gay ordination within our constitution and polity. Some of us, for varying reasons, have not made this controversy our priority in discipleship, and yet are called upon nearly annually to line up with majority or minority. The debates surrounding gay ordination have dominated our public discourse, informal and formal. Some of us believe this matter is a central issue of faith in our time. Some of us believe this focus has come, at least in part, at the expense of faithful attention and care to growth in our knowledge of Scripture, our ability to engage one another theologically, our courage to bring the love of Christ to our neighbor, our generosity and creativity in lifting the sorrows of our world, and our readiness to represent Christ in interfaith interactions.

After these three decades, evidence indicates there is not yet a unity of conscience on the subject of ordination standards. Margins in voting attest to the lack of consensus: for instance, the 218th General Assembly (2008) approved an amendment of G-6.0106b by a slim margin (380 affirmative, 325 negative, 3 abstaining),³ then the presbyteries rejected it, but with a significant minority (78 yes, 95 no).⁴ Polling data indicates that a significant majority of Presbyterian members oppose ordination of gay persons as Minister of Word and Sacrament.⁵ Yet, the same poll also indicates a smaller majority opposing ordination of gay persons as Elder or Deacon.⁶

Just as significantly, evidence suggests that our approach to the controversy has diminished our resemblance to the mind of Christ. While proponents of gay ordination have long argued that the church's prohibition is unbecoming of the gospel of Jesus Christ, opponents of gay ordination are beginning to notice the detrimental effects of the controversy. For instance, the Barna Group conducted research on Americans born between 1965 and 2002, who are "outsiders," namely, those looking at Christian faith from the outside. Representing an evangelical voice, authors Kinnaman and Lyons published their findings under the title, *Unchristian*, to denote the essence of outsiders' most common reaction to Christian faith: "they think that Christians no longer

³ <http://www.pc-biz.org/IOBView.asp?m=ro&id=1461>. accessed 17 March 2010.

⁴ <http://www.pcusa.org/generalassembly/vote08.htm>. accessed 17 March 2010.

⁵ "Would personally like to see the PC(USA) permit ordination of sexually active gays and lesbians as ministers (yes, definitely or yes, probably): Members 35%, Elders 30%, Pastors 64%, Specialized Clergy 64%. "A Presbyterian Panel Snapshot Characteristics of Presbyterians 2008," by Research Services, Presbyterian Church (USA). www.pcusa.org/research/panel.

⁶ Yes, definitely or yes, maybe permitting active gays and lesbians as elders: Members 45%, Elders 40%, Pastors 47%, Specialized Clergy 67%. Yes, definitely or yes, maybe permitting active gays and lesbians as deacons: Members 46%, Elders 41%, Pastors 48%, Specialized Clergy 68%.

represent what Jesus had in mind, that Christianity in our society is not what it was meant to be.”⁷ In their national surveys, Barna Group found that the three most common perceptions of present-day Christianity are antihomosexual (an image held by 91 percent of young outsiders), judgmental (87 percent), and hypocritical (85 percent).”⁸ Notwithstanding their conservative stance on homosexuality, the authors do not flinch from this alarming summary:

“When most of us engage homosexuals, we come across as arrogant, self-righteous, and uncaring—the opposite of how Jesus engaged outsiders. Rather than articulating a biblical perspective and living out a biblical response to homosexuals, the research demonstrates how inconsistent and uncompassionate—how unchristian—we have been.”⁹

Kinnaman and Lyons urge Christians who view homosexual behavior as sin to change their approach. They urge biblical responses which acknowledge complexity, treat others with respect, and above all demonstrate compassion.

Standards matter; yet, when our debate causes us to depart from such fundamental standards of Christian behavior as evidently perceived by many young Americans, then we have dimmed our capacity to witness to the Light of Christ. Further, by neglecting such standards of behavior—humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, and persevering effort for unity—we have fractured trust, withering the gift of community.

Calling for a 7-year fast and active waiting upon the Lord

Three decades of legislative wrangling has not yielded unity, nor does the future portend unity, no matter whether the majority holds or the majority shifts. Legislative effort does not appear to be the way at this time. Returning to Ephesians, then, though we have made long effort, we have not made every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Further, we have often forgotten along the way to act with humility, gentleness, and patience.

We believe the PC(USA) would benefit and the Lord would be glorified by a General Assembly call to fasting and active waiting upon the Lord. This is not to be understood as a moratorium in religious clothing. A moratorium is a legislative order, meaning

⁷ Kinnaman, David and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity...and Why It Matters*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007, p 15.

⁸ *Unchristian*, p 27.

⁹ *Unchristian*, p 93.

delay, implying inaction. In effect, it is often little more than a cease-fire, allowing opponents time to reload. Fasting, by contrast, is active. To fast is voluntarily to hold back or refrain from something in order to hunger for the Lord. To fast is to wait actively for the Lord, engaging in activities that sharpen our readiness for revelation, insight, and call.

To fast from legislative efforts to resolve the ordination standards controversy will be a significant spiritual challenge for many of us. It will require prayer, self-emptying, self-control, and community support. As with any fast, it must be voluntarily chosen, not coerced. This draws us closer to the mind of Christ (Philippians 2). As with every gift of grace, it will be costly.

Further, to fast is to hunger for the Lord, also understood as actively waiting upon the Lord. We believe that in our focus on legislative solutions, we have overlooked many potential efforts to maintain unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. We believe active waiting in this time means consciously, deliberately pursuing untried efforts, especially guided by the standard of behavior set forth in Ephesians 4.

The recommended length of the fast—seven years—stems from our biblical formation, as well as a sober recognition of the depth of fractures in many of our relationships. Time is an important tool for healing. Wounds more than thirty years in the making will not heal overnight.

Ephesians 4, Officers, and Forbearance

Our historic principles call us to preserve and nurture our unity by “exercising mutual forbearance in love.” This phrase, mutual forbearance, stems from Ephesians 4 in the King James Version, but does not quote it precisely. Paul does not beg the Ephesian church to “mutually forbear”; he begs them to “forbear.” We observe that despite all laudable pleas for mutual forbearance, no individual can exercise it. We can only forbear. We can offer only our own patience, we cannot demand it from another.

To paraphrase Barth (above), it behooves the church to think of this controversy only with forbearance, not with the forbearance which each expects of the other, but with the forbearance in which—whatever may be the cost—each is willing to precede [that is, offer first to] the other. Reconciliation precedes righteousness. Christ forbore us while we were yet sinners.

In such a time of division, it is especially incumbent upon Presbyterian leaders to equip themselves to nurture and affirm the gift of unity. Our recommendations encourage

officers to be grounded in biblical study and strengthened for the hard work of resisting temptation and exercising forbearance. Forbearance can restore trust, and the church hungers for trust.

Exhortations for majority and minority

Habits are hard to break. These statements specifically address those representing opposing viewpoints. We are so accustomed to the controversy that guidance is warranted in turning to a new direction.

“How, then, do communities of conviction within the church relate to other communities of different conviction within the church? If disassociation is ruled out, each group is called to life together. If castigation is ruled out, each group is called to speaking and listening in a manner that recognizes the integrity of the other. If indifference is ruled out, each group is called to bear faithful witness to its own apprehension of the truth.”¹⁰

These exhortations aim to assist in our call to life together, to recognizing the integrity of the other, and to bearing faithful witness.

In particular, the approaches outlined draw upon insights from the 1983 document, *Historic Principles, Conscience and Church Government*, prepared at the time of reunion of the UPCUSA and the PCUS to address issues of diversity of conscience. This document asserts the political means by which we cope with unity and diversity:

The polity of Presbyterianism—with its strong insistence on the rule of the majority and the rights of the minority—is indeed the way in which Presbyterians affirm their unity amid their diversity.”¹¹

We have therefore extended specific counsel to each group—majority and minority--within the PC(USA). Each group has a specific set of opportunities and responsibilities, protected by the polity of Roberts Rules, yet each group also has a more fundamental set of responsibilities set forth by biblical standards. Our counsel calls attention to

¹⁰ “Who’s In? Who’s Out? Pharisees, Presbyterians, and the Discernment of Faithfulness,” Joseph D. Small, *The Price H Gwynn III Church Leadership Series #5*, Louisville: Geneva Press, 2001.

¹¹ *Historic Principles, Conscience, and Church Government*, Adopted by the 195th General Assembly (1983) Presbyterian Church (USA), p 1.

opportunities and responsibilities for both majority and minority—opportunities and responsibilities which we believe have been thus far overlooked or under-explored in our wrestling with this controversy.

According to *Historic Principles*, the majority has the right to rule, to establish its own standards, and this freedom includes the right to be wrong. Nevertheless, the dissenter has rights. “The church protects its own minority point of view as if it were protecting its future, recognizing that the dissenter may well represent the will of God.”¹²

The Church is cautioned that schism is generally the result not of an issue itself, but of an improper understanding or use of Presbyterian polity, such as when

- “a governing body acts on crucial matters which affect the whole church, even with proper authority, but without giving consideration to consultation and the slow process necessary to aid in the building of consensus” and
- “an individual church officer or group of church officers become isolated from the governing body and see the action of the body as that of an enemy, thus refusing to take such action with seriousness.”¹³

While the majority has the right to rule, the minority has rights as well. After an action has been taken, individuals in the minority possess five specific rights: (1) the right to work for change, (2) the right of dissent, protest, or appeal, (3) the right of passive concurrence (abide by the rule without agreeing), (4) the right of active concurrence (changing one’s mind), and (5) the right of peaceful individual withdrawal.¹⁴

In three decades of debate, the minority has not explored the full complement of these rights. For instance, to our knowledge, there has been no sustained effort by those in the minority to enter a formal dissent or protest on the records of the governing body to which they belong. Better, the right to work for change can include non-legislative and non-judicial methods.

Because both sides seek to gain the majority, we cite this prophetic observation from the report:

“Divisiveness and schism are most likely to occur when the church does not follow its own procedures carefully. When an attempt is made to force

¹² *Historic Principles*, p 8.

¹³ *Historic Principles*, p 16.

¹⁴ *Historic Principles*, p 8.

consensus before the time is right, the impatience of those who demand premature action may produce a lack of proper attention to the convictions of a large minority. Such a lack is one which produces ill will and potential for schism.”¹⁵

The minority is now large. And even if the minority gains majority, the consequent minority will be large. We must try a different way.

¹⁵ *Historic Principles*, pp 11-12.