

Ordination of Openly Queer Persons of God in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A): The Dam is Leaking!

The topic of the ordination of openly queer individuals within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) has had a long history of debate. The debate itself has caused a great rift within the church and moved the focus from the ministry of the church to the principles of the church. These principles, unexamined standpoints, have slowly been absorbed into the psyche of the communities with the denomination and when questioned are met with a deadly combination of loving venom. Because of the trenches that have been dug within this debate, it seems as if we have lost touch with the underlying purposes of the fight.

“The mission of the Church is given form by God is activity in the world as told in the Bible and understood by faith” (G-3.0100). This section of the *Book of Order* continues to describe God’s intricate care for all of creation in general and God’s salvation history through Christ in particular (G-3.0101-3.0200). The interpretation of this activity in the world is presented as the mission of the Church in G-3.0300-3.0401. The striking thing about this interpreted mission is its focus on humanity. This is what has been lost sight of in the debate—people. The real problem that this debate is facing is the fulfillment of the mission of the Church as described in the *Book of Order*. There are many faithful individuals in the church being sent into exile because of the stance of the principled within the church. There are the people leaving the church because they feel it is becoming too mired in sin and those who are being out right excluded because of an aspect of their lives they do not consider sinful but others in the church do. Both sides have been left behind as the battle rages in the denomination. To that end, I think the

greatest need for ministry is for those who have been marginalized in the church and whose salvation has been questioned. The queer folk in our denomination have been long silenced and marginalized in the denomination because of an unquestioned principle inherited from our modern age.

To understand this we need to see where this mentality, this principle, arose. Taking a lead from Michel Foucault in his historical and philosophical recounting of the role of sexuality throughout the ages in the work *The History of Sexuality*ⁱ, we can see how and possibly why the ordination of queer folk is such a huge issue in the denomination. When the Age of Reason began science started to replace the old structures of the church in regards to the authority by which people directed their lives. Science and human reason became the complementary theses that drove the growth of culture and civilization in the western world. In that same vein, medicine began to grow in its categorizing and problematizing of the human species. Laws of proper sexual activity were created based on the discourse of science with the state. At this same time the state was taking interest in a new concept it had developed called ‘population.’ No longer was the state looking at the people whom lived within its borders as mere inhabitants but a population capable of supporting and sustaining the state in its mission. The world was becoming industrialized and it was doing it as humanly rationally as possible. Consciously or subconsciously, medicine supported the state’s desire to control the size and health of the population. Any activity that was not beneficial for growing and sustaining the population was considered superfluous and as such needed to be weeded out. Rules of decorum, purity, piety and of course sexual restraint exploded upon the population. All of these rules were supported by the reasons of science in declaring a

single way of understanding sex as merely for procreative ends. All other forms of sexual interaction were considered deviant at the least and a biological disease more commonly.

During this time the notion of a division of “sexualities” was developed. Before this time no division existed in regards to “preference” for sexual activity. Science changed all that and created a class of people which would be oppressed, marginalized, and even killed and a cancer within the state’s ‘population.’ These people were considered impure and categorized by science as such. Because the authority of “correct living” was moved from that of the church to that of science, society followed suit and reacted to deviation for the norms setup by science as strongly if not stronger than the state’s reaction.

This mentality, this unquestioned principle, is buried deep with our social structures and can be seen in the talking points of those embattled over the issue of re-inclusion of queer folk into society. The issue of same-sex marriage in our society brings many of these principles to the surface as seen in such quotes as; "The only way to reproduce is with a man and a woman. Who will take the [lawmaker's] seats here if we are not able to reproduce?"ⁱⁱⁱ We can see a plea to science in the quote’s argument and the notion that the ‘disease’ of homosexuality will spread through the human population if it is not curtailed. The church itself has also been infected by this reliance on science and reason as the authority of resolving the debate within the church.

The General Assembly has fallen into this trap and ordered numerous studies into sexuality. In 1976ⁱⁱⁱ the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (UPCUSA) passed a resolution to "reaffirm our adherence to the moral law of

God...that...the practice of homosexuality is sin...Also we affirm that any self-righteous attitude of others who would condemn persons who have so sinned is also sin." They directed "...that a task force be established...to study Christian approaches to Homosexuality, with special reference to the ordination of avowed practicing homosexuals." Further appealing to the norms of social scientific understandings of humanity, in 1978 The UPCUSA stated that homosexuality was "not God's wish for humanity...Even where the homosexual orientation has not been consciously sought or chosen, it is neither a gift from God nor a state nor a condition like race; it is a result of our living in a fallen world". They called upon their members to "work for the passage of laws that prohibit discrimination in the areas of employment, housing, and public accommodations based on the sexual orientation of a person." However, the Assembly did not extend such prohibition of discrimination to their own clergy: They concluded that "...unrepentant homosexual practice does not accord with the requirements for ordination set forth in" the UPCUSA constitution. The task force created in 1976 submitted their report to the Assembly, who recommended that it be distributed as a study document.^{iv} In 1988 the church again revisited the appeal to science and called for a study to examine all aspects of the church's approach to human sexuality. In 1991, the report of the *Special Committee on Human Sexuality* was issued. It was titled "Presbyterians and Human Sexuality 1991." The majority concluded that the church should consider homosexuals and their relationships exactly as it considers heterosexuals and their relationships. General Assembly documents indicate that no decision was made on either report; neither the majority nor the minority position was accepted. From here all appeals to reason were lost and the situation degraded into entrenched warfare and is

where the church finds itself now.

In sharp response to the majority report of 1991, a resolution was proposed in 1992 to expel all gay and lesbian members from the church and send them to other denominations. Actions like this threatened to destroy the church and as such a three-year moratorium was declared on even the discussion of the issue at General Assembly. Instead the church was to go into a period of study on the issue. As soon as the church came out of the moratorium an amendment was passed (1996-1997) that attempted to ban, in more explicit terms, the ordination of queer folk in committed relationships as well as sexually active heterosexual persons living outside the bounds of marriage. Ominously called with the church “Amendment B” (G-6.0106b), it has further divided the church and the numerous attempts to resolve the issue have failed. Because of the entrenched nature of the debate and the lack of compassion of the human casualties of the issue, a few within the church have begun to use the polity and courts of the church itself to work for the inclusion of those excluded specifically by the studies of the church and Amendment B.

Through various PJC rulings the church has come to a point at which there has been given just enough wiggle room to allow for openly queer individuals to pass through the ordination process with a clear conscious or needing to lie about their relationship. The cracks in the Dam of G-6.0106b revolve around the use of the words “chastity” and “self-acknowledged.” Further, questions of the validity of ordination can only be brought forward when the person making the accusation of potential sin and non-repentance in practice can demonstrate in a, “plain, palpable and obvious way” or if the ruling body has “direct and specific knowledge.” This requirement setup by the GAPJC for questioning

has the potential and has in fact blocked the challenges of ordination for openly queer individuals from ever reaching the trial stage. More importantly, the GAPJC has held “the formation and celebration of same-sex unions find affirmative warrant in the Directory of Worship, and that the church may recognize and support such unions without endorsing conjugal practice.”^v

This interpretation has been upheld as far as the Synod level by the PJC for the Synod of the Northeast. To that end, there are three openly queer individuals whom are in committed same-sex relationships who have been able to be ordained to the ministry of word and sacrament and retain their ordination.

The above deals with the notion of “self-acknowledged” and some see this as keeping the topic of sexual contact in the closet. For some this may weigh heavy on their conscious in answering the questions for ordination. Fortunately, our own polity and confessions offer a respite for these individuals’ mind. “Chastity” as defined in the Book of Confessions is required of married and non-married individuals. It does not mean, as some would hold, “celibacy.” At least it does not have this meaning historically within the Confessions of the church. When looking at a candidate for readiness in ordination, those living in a committed same-sex relationship can be determined to be living a very chaste life together. Further, because the Directory for Worship has no designation for the status of unmarried individuals other than “single,” many have concluded that those in same-sex relationship fall under the designation of “single” according the *Book of Order* and as such can live a “chas[ed life] in singleness” (G-6.0106b) and still be in a same-sex relationship. A further conclusion that has been drawn from the use of the phrase, “refuse to repent” found in Amendment B is that because the candidate is self-

affirming of his/her orientation, she/he has not “refused” to repent because she/he demonstrates a belief that the relationship is not sinful. Allowing the candidate to answer the questions of ordination with a clear conscious.

Where does this leave the church and its polity? The factions in the church will continue to battle over this issue leaving a path of destruction on local congregations but we can see that God’s in breaking Spirit has miraculously allowed for the inclusion and ordination of those who have been marginalized in the church. We’ve seen this in breaking of God into the Presbyterian Church’s polity as God allowed for the inclusion of women into the office of minister, the destruction of the church’s support for slavery, and now the inclusion of queer folk.

But what does this mean for us? What actions/interventions can we take? In these questions I am reminded of Matthew 15:21-28. In the beginning of the story Jesus seems quite strange in his reactions. In fact he doesn’t even seem like the Jesus we have all come to know and love. Jesus is seemingly ignoring a woman crying out for help just because she is a different nationality. Jesus even calls her a dog and unworthy of God’s promise. The woman persists in her cries for justice and catches Jesus in a logical trap. I imagine Jesus was quite amused that this woman had changed the mind of God with her faith. Some might even argue that this woman changed all of Christian history by opening up God’s promise of a chosen people to the entire world. God’s preferential care for the poor, the sick, the marginalized no longer was limited to the Abrahamic covenant but through Christ it was opened to all peoples. Christ has given the queer amongst us in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) the crumbs from the table to nourish them and bring into full inclusion at the table of Christ. Our unquestioned principles of Presbyterianism

must be radically changed to conform to the new direction that God is calling our church. No longer can we find comfort in the sameness of education, wealth, sexuality, and race. We must return to what the Gospel calls us to be and that is God's Love and Justice in the world, the *ecclesia*, the church that God is changing us into. Now this new call for the church is not new at all. We as a church even have it in our *Book of Order* but it has been our principles that have lead us astray. Chapter 3 of the *Book of Order* reads in part, "[the mission of the church is] healing, and reconciling and binding up wounds; ministering to the needs of the poor, the sick, the lonely and the powerless; engaging in the struggle to free people from sin, fear, oppression, hunger and injustice; giving itself and its substance to the service of those who suffer; sharing with Christ in establishing His just, peaceable and loving rule in the world. The Church is called to undertake this mission even at the risk of loosing its life, trusting in God alone as the author and giver of life, sharing the Gospel and doing those deeds in the world that point beyond themselves to the new reality in Christ" (G 03.0400).

“Even at the risk of loosing its life.” Are we willing to go forward helping the oppressed, the poor, the sick, and the marginalized even if it means we have to close the doors of this church? The principle we must come back to in the church is the same principle that Jesus learned on the road in the story in Matthew of the woman changing the mind of God with her faith. God is open to all peoples and God will help the poor, the sick, and the marginalized over and above those whom already live in comfort and wealth. We must put aside our comfort, our wealth, and our very selves for those whom God has called us to help. We must open our doors to those who are different than ourselves. To those who are black, poor, gay, Latino and Latina, lesbian, sick, lonely,

transgendered, and especially those who are powerless in our society, we must risk our very lives and our very institution to help them as God has called us to do. We have been called out of our isolation and into the world of diversity, which God has wonderfully made for all of creation. In as much the church has already confessed this to be God's call as such I will end with a gender and discrimination inclusive quote from the Confession of 1967.^{vi}

"In each time and place, there are particular problems and crises through which God calls the church to act. The church, guided by the Spirit, humbled by its own complicity and instructed by all attainable knowledge, seeks to discern the will of God and learn how to obey in these concrete situations...

- a. God has created the peoples of the earth to be one universal family. In [God's] reconciling love, [God] overcomes the barriers between brothers [and sisters] and breaks down every form of discrimination...real or imaginary. The church is called to bring all peoples to receive and uphold one another as persons in all relationships of life: in employment, housing, education, leisure, marriage, family, church, and the exercise of political rights. Therefore, the church labors for the abolition of all...discrimination and ministers to those injured by it. Congregations, individuals, or groups of Christians who exclude, dominate, or patronize their [brothers and sisters], however subtly, resist the Spirit of God and bring contempt on the faith which they profess."

God has given us the means to get back to what this debate is really about. It is not about

sexuality, about the social status of it as a disease, or about even about “what the confessions historically have called sin.” The issue and situation in ministry is that of the people of God and the mission of Christ’s church to those people. As a minister of word and sacrament I will be asked to uphold this mission of the church and I pray I will be able to minister to the queer folk who are being outcast and hurt by the church. To accomplish this I will need to support of queer clergy, elders, and members so that my voice is not the only one but I am found in a community of Christ that speaks to the oppressed from the voice of the margins just as Christ spoke from the margins. In so doing, what I see the queer movement accomplishing for us in the public square is exactly what I see the church needing to do in the local community. Too long has the church postured itself to maintain the oppressive power structures of the particular society in which it rests. It started in 312C.E. and has only become worse as the church has dulled its perception of just how radical Jesus and his followers were when it came to the understanding of how authority or "power" worked in a Godly society. Christ came to free us from the bonds of this original sin in society but the church throughout history has been the one upholding and creating more of these sins of power and oppression of the marginalized. The church must remove the blinders from its eyes. In so doing I believe God has called the queers, those who challenge the societal norms, to rise up within God's Church and awaken the church on earth to the oppression and sinfulness it has sunk in to as it has grown the world over. The Dam will break. It’s just a matter of when God’s people will help it to fall and tear down all walls of separation even at the risk of loosing their life.

ⁱ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*: vol. 1;2;3, (Vintage Books: New York, 1990).

ⁱⁱ Indianapolis Star, February 2, 2005.

ⁱⁱⁱ The following sentences are direct quotes found at
<http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom_pru6.htm>

^{iv} "The Church and Homosexuality," (1978). Publication #OGA-88-042.

^v Tricia Dykers Koenig and others, "Examination of Officers-Elect: A Resource for Sessions", (Covenant Network of Presbyterians: Cleveland Heights, 2004), 8.

^{vi} Part II The Ministry of Reconciliation, Section A The Mission of the Church, Point 4 Reconciliation in Society.