

Our Challenging Way: Faithfulness, Sex, Ordination and Marriage

Introduction

. The Way We Have Chosen

- *We Have Decided . . . Not to Decide*
- *Other Denominations Have Taken a Different Way*
- *Sometimes We Have Chosen a Different Way*

II. Why Go This Way?

- *But Is It Reformed?*
 - *So Will We Stretch, or Will It Break?*
 - *Can a Denomination Do This?*
 - *Why? Why Accept the Challenge?*
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The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), in recent decisions on ordination and same-gender marriage, is attempting to map a challenging way forward. We have decided not to declare *as a denomination* whether same-gender sexual relationships are (under certain conditions: marriage or some form of clear commitment) to be regarded as faithful and holy. We have set ourselves on this way twice: regarding ordination and regarding marriage. This means our denomination grants the legitimacy and Christian faithfulness of directly opposing views of what Jesus Christ calls us to in one of the basic elements of human life. As far as our denomination is concerned, it is equally faithful to proclaim that God calls Christians to sexual relationship in the context of the marriage of a man and a woman or to proclaim that God calls Christians to sexual relationship in the context of the marriage of two people, regardless of their gender.

Should we accept this challenge and choose this way?

What follows explores this challenging way. First, it is important to think carefully about what our denomination has actually done in regard to ordination and marriage. One way to understand what we have done is to consider other ways we might have gone in addressing our disagreements about faithful sexual relationship. Other denominations have made a different choice. We PC(USA) Presbyterians have decided other divisive issues in a different way, choosing uniformity on highly contested matters. Second, it is important to think about why we would choose this challenging

way. Does our challenging way fit with who we are, with our Reformed and Presbyterian heritage? What challenges will we confront on this way we are traveling—from outside and from within our denomination? Finally, we address the question “Why? Why accept the challenge?”

I. The Way We Have Chosen

We Have Decided . . . Not to Decide

In 2010 the General Assembly sent to presbyteries an amendment to the *Book of Order*, revising an explicit standard for elders and deacons in our denomination. That standard (added to the *Book of Order* in 1996) specifically stated that those ordained to office in our denomination were “to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness.” The amendment, which was approved by a majority of presbyteries, removed the specific standard for faithful living with regard to sexual practice, instead underlining the responsibility of councils to assess candidates for ordination or for installation “guided by Scripture and the confessions.”^[1] *As a denomination* we have no uniform standard for ordination with regard to sexual relationship. We affirm that it is equally appropriate for the councils of the church to apply different, even opposing, standards in this area.

We are walking the same challenging way in addressing marriage. This summer (2014) the General Assembly passed two actions regarding marriage: an authoritative interpretation (AI) and a proposed amendment to the *Book of Order*. Both actions seek to walk this challenging way.

The General Assembly issued an AI allowing pastors to conduct a same-gender marriage service and sessions to authorize the use of a congregation’s facilities for such a service, where the laws of the state allow. Two features of this AI embody the challenging way we are charting forward. First, the AI is modestly reticent in the language it uses: “same-gender” or equivalents are never used. Instead, the AI speaks of “a couple” or “the couple.” Second, the AI explicitly states that in our denomination it is equally faithful for pastors to affirm that they will conduct marriage services only for the marriage of a man and a woman: “In no case shall any teaching elder’s conscience be bound to conduct any marriage service for any couple except by his or her understanding of the Word, and the leading of the Holy Spirit.” As a denomination, we regard these understandings of Christian faithfulness in marriage, even in their disagreement, as equally faithful.

The General Assembly also voted to send presbyteries an amendment to the *Book of Order*, changing its definition of marriage from “a man and a woman” to “two people.” Like the AI, the amendment embodies the challenging way forward we are charting. The amendment is also modestly reticent in the language it uses. It specifies that marriage is between “two people” and “the couple” or “a couple.” “Same-gender” or equivalents are never explicitly used, although they are obviously implied. Further, as with the AI, the amendment includes language clearly expressing the validity of both opposed understandings of marriage in the Christian life: “Nothing herein shall compel a teaching elder to perform nor compel a session to authorize the use of church property for a marriage service that the teaching elder or the session believes is contrary to the teaching elder’s or the session’s discernment of the Holy Spirit and their understanding of the Word of God.” This proposed amendment would declare that as a denomination we regard it as equally faithful to proclaim that God calls people together in marriage either without regard to their genders or with regard to their being a woman and a man. The proposal put before us by the General Assembly is that as a denomination we regard both understandings of the Word of God, both leadings of the Holy Spirit—opposed as they may be—as equally faithful.

Other Denominations Have Taken a Different Way

Other denominations have addressed the deep disagreements about faithfulness and sex in different ways than we have. The recent marriage study prepared at the direction of the 220th General Assembly (which met in 2012) put it this way, focusing on the question of ordination to church office:

The Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America have both made affirmative statements on the place of gay and lesbian persons in the life of the church, grounding the permission to ordain on the basis of these positive statements. Our denomination, by contrast, chose the path of removing formal barriers to ordination without adopting a new constitutional position on same-gender relationships. In regard to ordination, the PC(USA) has now chosen the path of mutual forbearance, declining to impose one position in a matter where conscientious Presbyterians disagree. Therefore, as the PC(USA) now considers same-gender marriage, we do so in the absence of any polity guidance concerning our understanding of God’s will for the committed relationships of persons who are gay or lesbian.[\[2\]](#)

Sometimes We Have Chosen a Different Way

Faced with sharp internal division on questions of theology and polity, we have sometimes chosen to require uniformity, choosing one side over another. One such choice was made in the 1970s, regarding the ordination of women. Walter Wynn Kenyon, a candidate for ordination as teaching elder, was examined for ordination by Pittsburgh Presbytery. Kenyon articulated objections to the ordination of women and a conviction that he personally could not ordain a woman. But he also indicated his willingness to work with women who had been ordained, including his willingness to work with women elected to church office by the congregation he was called to pastor (he affirmed his willingness to have another minister lead the service of ordination). Having examined him, the presbytery voted in favor of ordaining Kenyon. The presbytery's decision was appealed in the church courts, and that decision was overturned. We decided in favor of uniformity of practice and polity.[\[3\]](#)

The recent decisions regarding ordination and marriage seek to give secure constitutional standing to our challenging way. Nevertheless, there is concern that despite these intentions a judicial decision—within the PC(USA)'s judicial system—could undo our challenging way, requiring uniformity on these issues. The trajectory of the Kenyon decision leads to this concern. A judicial decision “Kenyonized” a uniform standard regarding the ordination of women. The judicial decision in the Kenyon case was based on language in the *Book of Order* that emphasizes nondiscrimination. The decision sets out this basic principle: “There are numerous requirements in the *Book of Order* that the leadership of our church be open to all regardless of race, ethnic origin, sex, or marital status.”[\[4\]](#) Could our denomination use similar rationale, based on similar passages in our current *Book of Order*, to choose one side in our present balance of views regarding the place and parameters of sex in faithfully following Jesus Christ?[\[5\]](#) So far, we have chosen a different trajectory.[\[6\]](#)

II. Why Go This Way?

But Is It Reformed?

Faced with a challenging way forward, wondering whether we should travel down this way, we sometimes check our bearings by asking whether it is Reformed. Is it Reformed to shape our life together in this challenging way? Doesn't being Presbyterian require more uniformity, a common commitment to practicing a more uniform view?

Our Presbyterian sisters and brothers in the Church of Scotland, as they too struggle with issues of sexual faithfulness, offer us encouragement to pursue the more challenging way. The Church of Scotland, historically a central source of so much of our form of Presbyterianism, already has chosen, on particular matters, to affirm opposing views of what we are called to believe and do if we follow Jesus Christ.^[7] Their hope is that these choices could provide a way through today's disagreements.

Take, for example, remarriage following divorce. In the Church of Scotland it is permissible for minsters and sessions to decline, for reasons of conscience, to conduct the marriage service of a person who has been divorced while the former spouse is still alive. The Church of Scotland established a conscience clause regarding this matter, which has been in place since 1959. As a recent report from its Theological Forum puts it: "The conscience clause recognized that, while a settlement in favour of permission was the will of the Church, there was a significant minority upon whom such a settlement could not be imposed."^[8]

This decision about remarriage has sparked imagination for a way forward in living out disagreements about faithful sexual relationship and marriage. The decision "may provide a model by which the Church, if so minded, can agree to disagree on an issue of theology and morals, and protect the views of each side of the debate through a freedom of conscience provision which is not merely a temporary expedient."^[9] There is every reason to believe that we too can "protect the views of each side of the debate through" a validation of differing convictions "which is not merely a temporary expedient." This commitment will be crucial for us, the PC(USA), if we are successfully to walk the challenging way we have charted.

So Will We Stretch, or Will It Break?

We have decided that we will take no denomination-wide stance on whether Christian faithfulness calls us to sexual relationship in the marriage of two people without regard to their gender, or between a woman and a man. It means that significant numbers of us will be saying, teaching, proclaiming, and practicing opposing things about what following Jesus Christ calls us to in this part of life.

Can we do it?

The commitment we have made to walk this challenging way will put us to the test. Our commitment will be tested by forces at work *outside* our denomination and forces *within*.

There will be those *outside* our denomination who will regard our challenging way as confused, as a blatant failure to do what, to those outside voices, is obviously the only right thing to do. These voices are likely to be heard from across the spectrum of views about what is faithful and moral. To the degree that we find people outside the denomination whom we respect, and with whom we generally agree, objecting to our way, ridiculing the perceived failure to do what these folks regard as obviously right, we will find ourselves pressured to reject the complexity and balance of our way and instead to demand uniformity.

The impulse to demand uniformity can come also from *within*. The drive toward uniformity is an abiding presence in the life of our denomination. The decision in the Kenyon case is one embodiment of that impulse in our life together. Walking our challenging way will require us to grapple with pressures toward uniformity from within our own denominational DNA, as well as pressures from outside our denomination.

One step forward on our challenging way was taken when the General Assembly considered the proposed amendment to the *Book of Order's* language about marriage. A new final paragraph was added, as noted earlier. If the amendment is approved, teaching elders and sessions will be fully authorized to proclaim and live what they believe is according to the Word of God and the leading of the Holy Spirit in these matters. As a denomination, we regard it as equally faithful to teach and practice the marriage of two people without regard to their gender or as uniting a woman and a man.

Can a Denomination Do This?

The way we are charting forward will be especially challenging for us because we are a denomination. Denominations are groups of people who join together to live out the Christian faith in one of the ways in which it can faithfully be lived, supporting and sustaining one another on that way. Denominations build structures (organizational and polity structures as well as actual buildings) to sustain members of the denomination in living together their particular way of embodying the Christian faith, which means that denominations have to choose what matters of faith they will have diversity on and what they will not. No denomination can be built on complete diversity on everything.

The Christian faith can be lived out in more than one faithful way. Presbyterian, Methodist, Pentecostal, Roman Catholic—each of these (and more) is a faithful way of living out the one Christian faith. Each of them is open to being lived out in ways that

are faithless, but also in ways that are deeply faithful. However, it is not possible to live all of these ways at once. To be committed to the Presbyterian way of living the Christian faith is to be unable to be committed to the Roman Catholic, and vice versa.

That is where one of the challenges faces us. What particular way of living the Christian faith are we collectively committed to living, together, as a single denomination? As we affirm differing views on ordination and marriage, what way of living the Christian life do we remain committed to together, in which we can support one another? Clearly, it is inadequate to answer, “Follow Jesus,” or something similar—Roman Catholics also are committed to following Jesus; members of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) also are committed to following Jesus. While that makes them and us Christians, it does not make us part of one denomination. So . . .

Why? Why Accept the Challenge?

Because we are committed to a future that is different from those moments in the past when we chased uniformity at the cost of broken relationship. Congregations and presbyteries among us are home to Christians of strongly differing views. Surely that is true of most of our congregations and presbyteries, no matter how large the majority on one side or the other. Our challenging way provides legitimate place for these differences.

Because we are people who trust one another to listen to the voice of conscience faithfully and to respond as we hear the Word of God clarified for us by the Holy Spirit. This trust makes us a people who reject even (especially?) our own desire to step into God’s place and make ourselves the Lord of one another’s consciences.

Because we are a people trying to find new ways to be a denomination, in a new time that calls us forward, to face a new context for all Christians in a society in which Christianity no longer holds the assumed shaping role it once held, a context in which we are losing the luxury of uniformity.

Because issues around sexual faithfulness will not go away. The last two decades have been marked by intense rancor *and* have demonstrated the truth that *iron sharpens iron*. None of us on our own would have mapped the way forward we now are walking. This way forward gives hope that we can build a context, a denomination, where we can engage this issue productively, less contentiously, and with full (and differing) conviction. No matter our view, we all know the issues are not going away—not for us and not for our children.

The challenging way we are charting forward embodies a decision to choose some values over others. It requires us to acknowledge that there are faithful brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ who disagree deeply, profoundly, with us about what Scripture calls us to as we seek to follow Jesus Christ closely day by day. It calls us to acknowledge that these disagreements are rooted in differing views of how God reveals to us God’s will for our lives, of what Scripture actually is and how it therefore functions to draw us after Jesus, of what sin is and how Jesus Christ addresses what sin is, and more. And, acknowledging all that, it invites us to remain committed to being one denomination, committed to following together one particular way of living the Christian faith, supporting and sustaining one another along that way.

The challenging way we are charting requires deep commitment to the dignity of sisters and brothers with whom we disagree, combined with a commitment to shape and reshape our denomination’s structures in ways that allow as many of us as possible to remain—in good conscience—within this particular denomination, together living the Christian faith in the PC(USA)’s distinctive way. Understood properly, such commitments are one genuine form of love. This way forward can be our distinctive effort to (in the words of the Church of Scotland’s Theological Forum) “provide a context in which even if church people disagree, they may remain together in good conscience”^[10]—instead of pursuing uniformity and its values. Such is, if we will, the challenging way we now are invited to walk, together.

Notes

[1] The earlier policy is found in the *Book of Order* for those years, at G-6.0106b. The revised language is found in the *Book of Order* at G-2.0104b.

[2] Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Christian Marriage in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.): A Six-Week Study* (Louisville: Office of Theology and Worship, 2013), ix. Links to this study may be found at www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/theologyandworship/marriage.

[3] An earlier version of this paper suggested that the Kenyon decision ruled out “contrary opinion.” The decision, while allowing contrary *opinion*, required *uniformity of practice* with regard to the ordination of women.

[4] The quotation, and the details in the preceding sentences, are from *Minutes of the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, Part I, Journal, One Hundred and Eighty-seventh General Assembly, Cincinnati, Ohio, May 12–21, 1975*, pp. 254-9, with the quoted sentence appearing on p. 258.

[5] Ellen Babinsky, retired professor of church history at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, has observed that the decision in the Kenyon case effectively made the ordination of women an essential tenet of the denomination: “The Permanent Judicial Commission ruled that the decision [to ordain Kenyon] was not constitutional because the belief in the equality of all people before God had now become an essential tenet of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America.” Ellen Babinsky, “How Far Forbearance?: The Authority of the Presbytery Regarding Ordination,” *Insights*, Spring 1991, available at <http://home.earthlink.net/~valewis/forbearance.html>. The judicial decision in the Kenyon case speaks of a requirement to “subscribe” to the specific “constitutional provisions” in question (*Minutes*, p. 259).

[6] Commitment to this *new* trajectory finds explicit expression in both the AI and the proposed amendment, in the clear language emphasizing freedom of conscience in these matters, as noted and explored above.

[7] These matters are explored in the “Proposed Deliverance” of the Theological Forum of the Church of Scotland, May 2014, available online.

[8] Theological Forum of the Church of Scotland, “Proposed Deliverance, May 2014,” 2.5.1.3.

[9] Theological Forum of the Church of Scotland, “Proposed Deliverance, May 2014,” 2.5.1.3. The earlier report was submitted in 2011.

[10] Church of Scotland Theological Forum, Proposed Deliverance of May 2014, 2.1.6.