

Theology Matters

A Publication of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry

Vol 13 No 1 • Jan/Feb 2007

Sex and the City of God: Part I

By David D. Swanson

This sermon was preached by Dr. David Swanson at First Presbyterian Church, Orlando, FL on Aug. 20, 2006.

Text: 1 Corinthians 6:12-20

Have you noticed lately, as I have, that sex shows up in just about everything we read or hear? It seems like every time I turn around, I am getting bombarded with yet another sexual reference or some kind of innuendo. When Leigh and the kids were out of town for a week this summer, I ventured out to Publix to buy some basic male food staples, namely peanut butter, Twinkies and breakfast cereal. When I got to the check-out counter, I was amazed by the number of magazines that had a feature on some element of sex or sexuality. It was everywhere. In fact, I was so amazed that I went back two days later and purchased a few of them just so I could show you. Look at these: GLAMOUR: “Our 7 Best Sex Secrets EVER,” plus “How to Feel Sexy at 20, 30, and 40”; COSMO GIRL: (for teen girls) “The New Virginity Code: Are You or Aren’t You?”; COSMOPOLITAN: “What Guys Notice” (and I don’t think they’re talking about football rankings) plus “Sex Kitten Makeup—Tricks to Make you Irresistible” (there’s an admirable goal—being a sex kitten—watch out for that litter box); GENTLEMEN’S QUARTERLY: “I Was a Phone Sex Addict”; SELF: “Make Sex Sizzle” plus “Get a Hot Body”; ESSENCE: (primarily for a Black audience) “Uncensored Sex Report: Real Guys tell you what they want in Bed”; and here’s one aimed at the Latin American community—MUEVELO—the entire cover is in

Spanish, but as I looked at it, here’s an article on “Fantasias Sexuales.” Now I don’t even speak Spanish, but I’m pretty sure I know what that means.

You should have seen the look on the check out girl’s face when I bought all these. After she had rung up about the fifth one, she said, “Pretty interesting reading material.” I kind of shrugged my shoulders and said, “Well, I know it looks funny, but I’m a pastor—this is sermon research.” With that, she gave me one of those looks that said, “Yeah, and I’m Laura Bush.” Then, as if to test me, she said, “What church?” I said, “First Presbyterian downtown—we’re on TV at 9:30 on Sundays—if you tune in in two weeks, you’ll hear what I have to say about all this.”

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Am I right? It's everywhere, isn't it? We have become a society that is consumed by this one area with an ever-increasing willingness to accept promiscuity and immorality. The result, of course, has become a distortion of what our sexuality is all about—a distortion that affects our attitudes, opinions and behaviors—a distortion that is trickling down into the lives of our children. Teenagers today are becoming sexually informed and expressive at far younger ages than ever before. They are dressing more suggestively and engaging in sexual activity because, according to *Time* magazine, teens say "as long as you're not having intercourse the rest doesn't matter." Not only is it affecting us as families, but now it is affecting the larger context in which we live. Canada now allows same-sex unions as does the state of Massachusetts. Many states are debating whether or not to accept such unions. Some are pushing for a constitutional amendment which defines marriage as between a man and a woman. The Episcopal Church has elected its first openly gay bishop. And in the midst of a sexually confused society, where has the church been? Strangely quiet. Quiet, in many respects, because the church has not wanted to sound offensive in the ears of a changing culture. However, I do not believe that the church can remain quiet in these confusing times. Therefore, this morning and next week, I will be speaking to the issues of sexuality in our culture.

As always, we turn for answers to the Word of God, and in particular, to Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church. Paul founded the church at Corinth, living there approximately 18 months before departing around year 51. About two years afterward, he began to get reports from the household of Chloe regarding division in the church and alarming information about sexual immorality. He also received a letter from the Corinthian church asking a number of questions stemming from the clash of their beliefs with those of their surrounding culture. You see, the Corinthians had a very high view of freedom and a very low view of the human body. Their catch phrase was "I am free to do anything." Thus, those who believed themselves wise and enlightened could do whatever they wanted. This was compounded by the dualistic approach they took to human existence. They saw a human being as half body and half soul, or spirit. The spirit was the important thing. The spirit was the essence of the true "you" – the "you" that would live into eternity. The earthly body was just a carrier. Epictetus said, "I am a poor soul shackled to a corpse." Since the body would eventually be discarded, what you did with it didn't matter. If you were hungry, you fed it. If you had a sexual appetite, you fed that, too. Give the body what it wants—satisfy its needs—or so the feeling went.

I wonder if any of that sounds the least bit familiar to us today? We, too, are living in an age where there is great emphasis placed on human rights and freedoms.

There is an almost universal acceptance of the idea that if something is OK to you, and any others involved, then it's morally OK. Thus, what we are seeing is an increasing willingness to satisfy whatever our physical desires may be without regard to outcomes or consequences or moral standards. I'm free to do what I want to do with my body. If I want to have sex with whomever, then why shouldn't I do that? I'm free. As long as the other person approves, what difference does it make? When you study this text, 21st century America looks very similar to first century Corinth, and it is exactly to these issues that Paul speaks God's Word of truth. Thus, as we seek to find secure footing about sexuality in these very confusing times, what does God teach us through Paul?

First, contrary to popular belief, your body DOES matter. Your decisions about your body matter. Paul begins in verse 12 by quoting to the Corinthians their own catch phrase, "Everything is permissible for me" or "I am free to do what I want." However, he turns it around and says, "BUT...not everything is beneficial." Yes, we may be free, choosing agents able to decide what we want and when we want it, but Paul raises the idea that within that freedom may be something that calls us to a higher standard—a standard determined by what is true or right. And where does that standard come from? It comes from the significance of the body God has given us. Paul says in verses 13-14, "The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord and the Lord for the body. By His power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us, too." What's he saying? He's saying your body matters. You are not a dualistic separation of spirit and flesh, but a unified whole. What happens to your body is happening to you. What you choose to do with your body happens to you. It is not separate. It is not insignificant. In fact, your body is going to be RAISED. What do we affirm each time we say the Apostles' Creed? "I believe in the resurrection of the body...." It is not just your spirit that goes on, but your body. When Jesus came up from the grave, he appeared to His disciples in glorified form. He had a glorified body. When Peter, James, and John were on the mount of transfiguration, they saw Moses and Elijah with glorified bodies. When we go to heaven, we go with a body, albeit in glorified form. As such, the human body is to be respected and honored. Psalm 139 reminds us, "You are fearfully and wonderfully made...." Ephesians tells us, "You are God's workmanship." Yes, when sin entered the world, your body became limited. Your body is not perfect, but neither is your spirit. Together they are decaying, and when we enter eternity, it is together that they will be redeemed.

Therefore, because our bodies are going to be raised, Paul says we need to be careful that we do with them only that which is beneficial—only what is right and good according to the standard set by the One who

made them. The way you use your body must be for more than mere self-indulgence. Corinthian men were given almost complete latitude in their sexual practice, including sex with prostitutes and children. Why? Don't you remember? In their mind, it was just their body. It didn't matter, so why not gratify it? We think indulging our sexual appetites is fine, whether it be via pornography or extra-marital sex or pre-marital sex—and why? Because our attitude is, “It's just sex. It's just our body. It doesn't really matter.” Well, it does. Your body is going to be raised. Therefore, we are to honor it by how we act; how we dress; how we present our physical form, and by how we engage it. Our theology of the resurrection of Christ informs how we view our physical existence. If you don't get that, then you won't understand why your body matters. However, if you do, then hopefully you will begin to live with more care and attention to how you use and present your body.

Second, not only does your body matter, but while you are on the earth your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. In other words, your physical body, in a very holy and mysterious way, becomes the dwelling place of God. Paul writes in verse 15, “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ Himself?” Then in verse 19, he says, “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?” What's he saying? He's saying that when you come into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, literally you become joined with Him—members of Him—filled by Him. A union has taken place between you and God. Verse 17 says, “He who unites Himself with God has become one with him...” Thus, spiritually and physically—not separate, but together—we are one with Christ. Now, stay with me, because this is where our spiritual understanding of sexuality runs completely contrary to the culture. **This is why sex is NEVER a purely physical act.** If we are one with Christ, then whatever else we join ourselves to, we are also joining Christ to, which is why marriage is such a holy gift. It is not just two, but three. In Genesis 2:24, which Paul also quotes here, God tells us that a man and woman will leave their families—and the two of them shall become “one flesh.” In the plan of God, spiritually and physically, they become one. It is the beauty and glory of marriage. The physical consummation is the outward sign and gift of all that God has done to join two together. It is why our male and female bodies have been created as they have—so that we may be joined as one by this wonderful, pleasurable gift involving not just us, but the Spirit of God who lives within us. Richard Hays wrote, “Sexual intercourse cannot be understood merely as a momentary act that satisfies a natural urge. Instead, it creates a mysteriously real and enduring union between man and woman.”

When all those things come together and God's design is fulfilled, that's when marriage becomes an awesome reality. However, what happens when we deny that? What happens when we live as Christians in the absence of this understanding? We have sexual relationships with people and, in effect, join ourselves to them—and join Christ to what is unholy. Paul says, “Shall I take the members of Christ (those who have union with Christ) and join them to a prostitute? Never!” The late Lewis Smedes, a professor at Fuller Seminary for many years, wrote in his book *Sex for Christians*, “No one can really do what the prostitute and her customer try. Nobody can go to bed with someone and leave his soul parked outside.” You cannot separate your spirit from your body, which is why people who have been sexually promiscuous find themselves feeling so empty and hungry for love. They are leaving bits of their spirit all over the place without actually being truly joined to another as Christ has designed. Do you see the difference? Sex is not a purely physical act. It is a physical and a spiritual union given to us by God through His living presence in us. When He is absent or ignored, we counterfeit the gift and corrupt its expression for our own benefit; and we are reaping the consequences of such action in every element of our society. If we want to make lasting social change in regards to our sexual morality, we must win the hearts of people to Jesus Christ. We are joined with Christ and, therefore, called to only join ourselves to that which is holy and right—our partners in marriage who also are committed to the Lord Jesus.

Third, and finally, your body belongs to THE LORD. This is where things get a little difficult because this is where Paul addresses our demand for personal rights and freedoms. He says in verses 19-20, “You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your body.” This is where all talk of sexual freedom and physical autonomy ceases. The language here is that of a slave and his or her master. The slave, once living in captivity, has now had his freedom purchased. Someone has laid down the cost for that freedom, and now the bonds of slavery are loosed. Paul writes in Romans 6:18, “You have been set free from sin AND have become slaves of righteousness.” Brothers and sisters, here's the reality: When you came to Christ, you were literally pulled from a pit from which you could not save yourself. I don't have time to go into a theology of sin, but we were destined for death and hell, and in that moment of suffering and dying and rising, Christ lifted us from that place and made us free. However, we are not then allowed to go and live as we choose. Because our lives have been purchased, they are no longer our own. This is where our faith flies in the face of our culture's emphasis on personal freedoms. We are free in Christ, yes, but we are still slaves to righteousness. We are not free to do as we choose, but we are free to glorify God with our bodies.

Therefore, we are not free to invent our own standards separate from God's Word. Men, you are not free to use your body in any way you see fit. You are not free to use pornography. You are not free to sleep with any woman who is not your wife. You are not free to engage in swapping partners even if your wife were to allow it. You are not free to engage in homosexual behavior. Men, you are not free to go out and satisfy your sexual lusts simply because you want to nor are you free to ignore the child that resulted from your desire to satisfy your physical needs. You are not free to be a dead-beat Dad. You are, in Christ, a slave to righteousness and He has control over your body, not you. You are instead called to glorify God with your body.

Women, you are not free to subscribe to the popular cultural myth that you are in control of your body and you have the right to "choose" what you are going to do with it. You don't. It's not yours. God, in Christ, has purchased your body, therefore, He is in control of how you use it. You are to glorify Him by its use, not merely choosing what is most convenient to you. As such, you do not have the choice that our culture thinks you have when it comes to unwanted pregnancy. If you choose to engage in an act designed to create life, you must be prepared to receive the life which may result. If not, don't have sex. A life that is conceived for whatever reason has value that transcends the means by which it was conceived.

Brothers and sisters, I know this is contrary to what you hear, and perhaps even to what you right now believe, but we are NOT free to do what we want. We have been purchased at a great price. As a result, what we do with our bodies is no longer under our control, but His, and the only parameter God gives us as a guide is this: What will bring Him honor and glory?

In closing, let me say this: We are all guilty of sin. I am not pointing the finger here, but trying to lead us to a foundation for understanding our sexual expression. God's grace is always present through His cross if we will allow it to work. C.S. Lewis wrote a book called *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* that Hollywood recently turned into a movie. At the end of the story, Aslan is put to death, but is raised back to life. When he encounters the children for the first time, they are overjoyed and he says, "The Queen's knowledge only goes back to the dawn of time. But if she could have looked a little farther back, she would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery

was killed in a traitor's stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards."

This has been tough subject matter this morning and it won't get any easier next week. However, I want you to hear that no matter what your choices have been up to this point, the power of the risen Christ is that which can enter your life and cause death and sin to work backwards—cracks and splits can be healed and choices redeemed. Nothing can extend beyond the grasp of God's grace and love for you. As we think about our sexually confused world, remember that when Christ comes to live in you, He gives you a new nature—a spiritual nature that tells you your body is important and we are to honor it by how we use it and how we present it—a nature that tells you that you have been united with Christ and as such you are not to join yourself to anything other than what is holy and pleasing to the Lord—a nature that even tells you that your freedom in Christ is NOT to do whatever you want with your body, but to glorify Him with it. These verses are the foundation of our understanding of sexual expression, and we will only begin to experience transformation in this area when we allow the Holy Spirit to work in us and through us towards obedience. Amen.

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Sex and the City Of God: Part II

By David D. Swanson

This sermon was preached by David Swanson on August 27, 2006 at First Presbyterian Church, Orlando, FL.

Text: Romans 1:16-27

In the summer of my middler year in seminary I began what would become a nine-month rotation as a student chaplain at a local Catholic hospital. I was 27 years old, fresh from my recent coursework in contemporary theology and its relationship to human suffering. In my mind, I was ready to take on whatever the hospital could throw at me. The hospital chaplain assigned each of the students to a particular floor, and my assignment was to minister to the patients on the floor dedicated to cancer and infectious diseases. My first few days and initial visits went fairly well. In the beginning, most of the people I saw were cancer patients, but on my third day, I made a visit to a person who had AIDS. I walked into the room and there before me was a frail, thin 52 year old man with AIDS who was holding hands with his 27 year old homosexual partner. Across the room sat the patient's mother and sister, and before I could get the picture entirely into focus, they each began introducing themselves to me. I don't think I heard one word they said that day because my mind was spinning with questions about what I should do and how I should respond. From my earliest days in the church—from the formative stages of my faith—I had been taught that homosexuality was sin in the eyes of God. Even so, here was a man lying before me that was clearly suffering, clearly dying, his family members clearly suffering, and a partner who seemed to deeply care for him. I was supposed to be the agent of God's truth and love in this hospital. I was supposed to bring to this family some measure of support and care, yet I had no idea how to do that. My immature mind spun with the possibilities. What would God have me do? Would God have me cut right to the point—dispense with the relational pleasantries—and share what I believed to be the truth of the gospel? Was I to tell these people, in the midst of their suffering, that they were sinners and needed to repent? Or was it something else? Would God have me love them and accept them as they were, not mentioning the sin-related things in the Scriptures, but only telling them what was easy and comforting to hear—passages about love or heaven? Or was I somehow supposed to mix those two things together? It seemed to be an enormous question without a clear answer.

As I have reflected on my experience in those days, I think it mirrors in many ways what our culture, and the church, is struggling with today. We are regularly confronted with individuals and organizations who label themselves as gay or lesbian and who actively campaign for social acceptance of their lifestyle. They want to have recognized as normal, acceptable parts of culture, everything from same-sex marriages to ordination into the ministry. These groups are pushing for a kind of sexual equality, an affirmation that their lifestyle is an acceptable alternative and not out of line with the God we worship. In the wake of such influence, it does appear that, indeed, our culture is softening its approach. It does seem that in many circles homosexuality is now viewed as normal. We are told that to view it otherwise is to be harshly judgmental and unfeeling. In our inclusive, tolerant world, we'd better not have an opinion on a controversial topic. We're just supposed to accept it. We now have companies that provide insurance coverage for partners, clubs on college campuses, even a nation to the north that approves gay marriage. On my son's second day of high school, he was asked by two openly lesbian girls sitting behind him if he was "gay or bi-sexual?" I could have sworn there was a third option in there somewhere. It is, in fact, becoming more widely accepted.

While many of us balk at such change, there is another side to what we observe if we'll just take the time to look more closely. In each instance, we are not dealing with "homosexuality." We are dealing with a person—a human being tempted by homosexual sin—a person wrestling and struggling with their own sense of identity and belonging in this world. This is the side we have lost and the one we must never forget. Statistics and terminology do not represent numbers, but real people with real hearts and real souls. Those numbers represent people in need of real love. And so, as Christians, what are we to do with this paradox? How are we to approach homosexuality in the church? How do we minister to people who struggle with homosexual sin in a loving, gracious manner that communicates to them the love of God and our love for them while at the same time not compromising the truth of the gospel and God's design for human sexuality? That is the tension

which we must hold and the tension which Paul brings into clear focus in the Scriptures this morning.

Whenever homosexuality is debated in Christian circles, more often than not Romans 1:26-27 is used as a clear admonition against homosexual behavior. While I agree with that idea, there is so much more to these verses that apply beyond just homosexuality, but to all of us. They speak to our understanding of homosexual sin and to our understanding of the entire human condition. Paul begins with a statement of hope, a clear celebration of the magnitude of God's salvation for all. In verse 16, he writes, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.... For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last..." Paul announces that the gospel of Jesus Christ is power, and it is the power of God to save ALL people. Note that he shares this at the very beginning of his letter. This is his theme—his thrust. However, quite abruptly in verse 18, he gives a clear, unrelenting view of the state of the human heart as it lives in darkness and sin, including God's coming wrath against that sin. Why? **In short, people will never understand the wonder of their salvation and the power of God to save until they realize what it is they are being saved from. They will not grasp the wonder of God's love until they grasp their need for a Savior.** If you have no understanding of sin, then you will have no appreciation for your salvation nor the means by which you have received it.

And what does Paul say? He says in verses 21-25, "although they knew God.... they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.... They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator....." So what, according to Paul, is the problem with us as human beings? We are inclined towards idolatry. We are naturally inclined, because of sin, towards EXCHANGING things of God for things of our own creation. In so doing, we distort the perfect will of God for our lives and for His world. What could be a better example of that human condition—that human tendency—than homosexuality? He says in verse 26, "Even their women and men exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones...." He speaks of it as an extreme, but graphic example, as if to say "Look here—as a result of this tendency to exchange the ways of God for the ways of the world—this tendency towards idolatry—they even did this—they even engaged in homosexual behavior!" For Paul's purpose, what could be a better illustration of the rejection of God's design in favor of our own, than men and women relating to each other in unnatural ways. Homosexuality is an outward and visible sign of an inward reality of sin, and Paul uses this one symptom as the cornerstone of his argument.

"This is what we are inclined towards—and look—here is a clear example!"

Paul does not stop there, however. He goes on to discuss all kinds of other sins, from greed to murder to gossip. Homosexuality is just one sin among many that Paul describes as a means of saying to the Romans, and to us, "this is the state you are in—and this is what the power of God has come to rescue you from!" This is why verses 16-17 are so important, because with this kind of sin, we NEED salvation. And where do we find it? We find it in the grace and power of God!

So, in light of Paul's teaching, what do we learn? First, is homosexuality wrong? Is homosexuality clearly and unequivocally sin according to the Scriptures? Absolutely. Yes. There is no question. As such, the church of Jesus Christ needs to affirm and stand firmly on the truth that is reiterated over and over again in God's Word: homosexuality is not part of God's design for us and is a sinful practice in His eyes. There is no debate—no need to discuss—it is as undeniably clear as anything I can find in Scripture. Further, all the reasons and rationalizations for turning homosexuality into something acceptable, from claiming genetic predisposition, to improper social development, to saying there is mutual consent and a loving relationship, these have no place in the argument. Why? All of those same arguments apply to other areas of sin in life as well. We are all dealt genetic flaws. Creation is not perfect. Each of us has been dealt "imperfections" in the way we were made. We all have baggage from our social development. Even so, those things do not then give us license to live in ways that are contrary to God's word. Homosexual behavior is simply not acceptable—for any reason—in the eyes of God and I want to be perfectly and completely clear on that idea. That is point one.

HOWEVER, I'm not through. You need to hear the next part as well. Don't sit there feeling all smug because of what I just said. Often, as Christians, our tendency is to hear the statement I just made and say rather pompously, "Yes, that's true—look at how dirty and bad those who struggle with homosexual sin are—they are such sinners." However, Paul's whole argument is not just about homosexuality. It is about the state of all of us—homosexual and heterosexual alike. Homosexuality is just an example which Paul uses to demonstrate that we all sin. We ALL exchange the things of God for the things of our own creation. Homosexuality in our culture is merely a symptom of the sin problem, and it is one of many sins which Paul goes on to discuss.

So the second thing we learn is that we are in the same boat as the homosexual and we suffer from the same disease that they do—it is the disease called sin. In the same way that the person who engages in

homosexual practice sins before God, so does the gossip sin—the greedy—the malicious—the envious—and the disobedient. We don't like to hear that because it seems to us that homosexual sin is so much worse. Sexual sin always strikes us at a point that makes us uncomfortable because it is such an intimate part of ourselves, and we can make ourselves feel so much better about our own lot by casting the sexual sinner in a darker shadow. But that is not the case. We have all been disobedient—and we all stand fundamentally as fallen—sinful before God—and that is what Paul is trying to communicate—that we ALL need the power of God to save.

What we learn as a church from Paul is that we need to quit looking down our noses at those who struggle with this lifestyle—or any other sin—and realize that we are standing in the same boat with them. We are no better and no worse in the eyes of God. I believe when we realize that truth, it will allow us to stop seeing homosexuality as an issue, and more as a personal struggle for thousands of people in this world, struggles similar to the very ones which we wage in our own lives. It just has a different name. It is that kind of understanding which will eventually allow the church to begin to minister to those who struggle with homosexuality, in the same way the church tries to encourage people about speaking truth—about showing kindness—about fleeing the love of money. It is about building up the Body of Christ so that all of us might more and more reflect the image of God to the world—and any sin—homosexual or otherwise—will distort that image.

Once again, there is that paradox: understanding that clearly homosexual behavior is wrong and needing to stand without compromise on that truth, but then finding that we identify and walk on the same path as those very people and to reject them is, in essence, **to reject ourselves**. So how, then, do we walk in faith? How do we deal with homosexuality as Christians?

First, we live and breathe and thank our God that He is the power for salvation for EVERYONE who believes. There is no one—no sinner—that is outside of the bounds of receiving the grace and love of God. “Where sin abounds” the Scripture says, “grace abounds even more.” There is an answer to the problem of sin—for all of us—and it is found in the power of God to save through Jesus Christ. Therefore, we are not defeated. We need not live in despair over our state of sin because God has rescued us from that when we receive Him by faith. In the same way He has rescued us, He desires to rescue others, regardless of their sin—or your opinion of it. Our task is to take that message of the power of God to save to ALL people.

Second, we must learn to walk the fine line of this paradox: standing firm on the Scriptures, yet also

demonstrating the compassion and love that Christ calls us to share. Richard Hansen wrote in a recent PFR publication, “We need something we do not yet have: a way of speaking about homosexual sin that does not falsify the biblical call to compassion for sinners; a way of speaking about compassion for homosexuals that does not distort the biblical call to holiness. Only by living out this paradox can we be truly biblical.” That is the way we must live—in that tension—because to let go of one side is to become homophobic, arrogant, and one who angrily yells “pervert” in the face of another as I saw a pastor do recently on television. To let go of the other is to let go of the Word of God and compromise the truth that we hold dear and the standard by which we are called by God to live our lives. To walk one way is to be the Pharisees who cannot see their own sin for their arrogance. To walk the other is to be as the money changers in the temple—allowing the influence of culture to overwhelm even the truth of God.

Where do we find one who can live in such a way? Who has ever done this? Jesus. We find it in the person of Jesus—the Messiah who said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.” We find it in the person of Jesus who ate with the sinners and tax collectors—who walked with lepers and prostitutes—who associated with the rabble of the earth because they were the ones who needed His love. It was Jesus “who while we were yet sinners, died for us.” While we were still mired in our sin, when we could do nothing for ourselves, Christ died. So, we go to those who may not be able to know the love of God for themselves, whether it is the homosexual or the liar, the thief or the gossip, and we bring the love of Jesus. We remember to bring the gospel, as Peter wrote, “with gentleness and respect,” for only as we love people will they be able to hear and understand our words.

We also see the model of Jesus as one who boldly spoke truth to those who denied him. It was Jesus who turned over the tables of the money changers in the temple courts, saying, “My house will be a house of prayer.” It was Jesus who turned to the Pharisees as they tried to trap him in the law and said, “You hypocrites. Give to God what belongs to God.” And it was Jesus who said to the defiant Sadducees, “You do not know the Scriptures or the power of God.” We must never fear to speak the truth boldly when confronted with anyone who would deny Christ—again whether that is the homosexual or the liar—the thief or the gossip. We speak the truth—but we speak it in love.

Remember, however, as sinners saved by grace, our sharing is not done in condemnation or judgment, but with the sincere and earnest desire to see the hearts of

sinner changed, just as our hearts have been changed by the love of Jesus Christ.

That patient I visited that first day in the hospital was named Tom Devor. Tom died some nine months later, but I believe God honored an initial decision I made to love first and share Christ in the midst of that love. Through those months he professed a deep faith in God and I believe today that he walks with angels and saints in glory. However, I do not believe he ever would have heard the message of salvation or understood God's love had I reacted with judgment, condemnation, or hostility, and he never would have heard it if I had chosen not to go in the room. Homosexuality is indeed one of the most difficult and challenging issues that we face in the church today, but my prayer is that we would

begin to pray and seek God, to ask for the living presence and direction of Jesus to be born within us, and that that would allow us to have the compassion of Jesus as he walked with lepers, the caring manner in which he spoke the truth in love. Amen.

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Subversive Virginit

By Sarah Hinlicky Wilson

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Okay, I'll admit it: I am twenty-two years old and still a virgin. Not for lack of opportunity, my vanity hastens to add. Had I ever felt unduly burdened by my unfashionable innocence, I could have found someone to attend to the problem. But I never did. Our mainstream culture tells me that some oppressive force must be the cause of my late-in-life virginity, maybe an inordinate fear of men or God or getting caught. Perhaps it's right, since I can pinpoint a number of influences that have persuaded me to remain a virgin. My mother taught me that self-respect requires self-control, and my father taught me to demand the same from men. I'm enough of a country bumpkin to suspect that contraceptives might not be enough to prevent an unwanted pregnancy or disease, and I think that abortion is killing a baby. I buy into all that Christian doctrine of law and promise, which means that the stuffy old commandments are still binding on my conscience. And I'm even naive enough to believe in permanent, exclusive, divinely ordained love between a man and a woman, a love so valuable that it motivates me to keep my legs tightly crossed in the most tempting of situations.

In spite of all this, I still think of myself as something of a feminist, since virginity has the result of creating respect for and upholding the value of the woman so inclined. But I have discovered that the

reigning feminism of today has little use for it. There was a time when I was foolish enough to look for literature among women's publications that might offer support in my very personal decision. (It's all about choice, after all, isn't it?) The dearth of information on virginity might lead one to believe that it's a taboo subject. However, I was fortunate enough to discover a short article on it in that revered tome of feminism, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. The most recent edition of the book has a more positive attitude than the edition before it, in that it acknowledges virginity as a legitimate choice and not just a by-product of patriarchy. Still, in less than a page, it presumes to cover the whole range of emotion and experience involved in virginity, which, it seems, consists simply in the notion that a woman should wait until she's really ready to express her sexuality. That's all there is to say about it. Apparently, sexual expression takes place only in and after the act of genital intercourse. Anything subtler-like a feminine love of cooking or tendency to cry at the movies or unsuppressable maternal instinct or cultivation of a wardrobe that will turn heads or even a passionate good-night kiss—is deemed an inadequate demonstration of sexual identity. The unspoken message of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* is clear enough: as long as a woman is a virgin, she remains completely asexual.

Surprisingly, this attitude has infiltrated the thinking of many women my age, who should still be new enough in the web of lies called adulthood to know better. One of my most vivid college memories is of a conversation with a good friend about my (to her) bizarre aberration of virginity. She and another pal had been delving into the gruesome specifics of their past sexual encounters. Finally, after some time, my friend suddenly exclaimed to me, “How do you do it?” A little taken aback, I said, “Do what?” “You know,” she answered, a little reluctant, perhaps, to use the big bad V-word. “You still haven’t...slept with anybody. How do you do it? Don’t you *want* to?”

The question intrigued me, because it was so utterly beside the point. Of course I want to—what a strange question! —but mere wanting is hardly a proper guide for moral conduct. I assured my concerned friend that my libido was still in proper working order, but then I had to come up with a good reason why I had been paying attention to my inhibitions for all these years. I offered the usual reasons—emotional and physical health, religious convictions, “saving myself” till marriage—but nothing convinced her until I said, “I guess I don’t know what I’m missing.” She was satisfied with that and ended the conversation.

In one sense, sure, I don’t know what I’m missing. And it is common enough among those who *do* know what they’re missing to go to great lengths to insure that they don’t miss it for very long. In another sense, though, I could list a lot of things that I do know I’m missing: hurt, betrayal, anxiety, self-deception, fear, suspicion, anger, confusion, and the horror of having been used. And those are only emotional aspects; there is also disease, unwanted pregnancy, and abortion. As if to prove my case from the other side, my friend suffered a traumatic betrayal within a month or two of our conversation. It turned out that the man involved would gladly sleep with her, but refused to have a “real relationship” —a sad reality she discovered only after the fact.

According to received feminist wisdom, sexuality is to be understood through the twin concepts of power and choice. It’s not a matter of anything so banally biological as producing children, or even the more elevated notion of creating intimacy and trust. Sometimes it seems like sex isn’t even supposed to be fun. The purpose of female sexuality is to assert power over hapless men, for control, revenge, self-centered pleasure, or forcing a commitment. A woman who declines to express herself in sexual activity, then, has fallen prey to a male-dominated society that wishes to prevent women from becoming powerful. By contrast, it is said, a woman who does become sexually active discovers her power over men and exercises it, supposedly to her personal enhancement.

This is an absurd lie. That kind of gender-war sexuality results only in pyrrhic victories. It’s a set-up for disaster, especially for women. Men aren’t the ones who get pregnant. And who ever heard of a man purchasing a glossy magazine to learn the secret of snagging a wife? Sacrifice and the relinquishing of power are natural to women—ask any mom—and they are also the secret of feminine appeal. The pretense that aggression and power-mongering are the only options for female sexual success has opened the door to predatory men. The imbalance of power becomes greater than ever in a culture of easy access.

Against this system of mutual exploitation stands the more compelling alternative of virginity. It escapes the ruthless cycle of winning and losing because it refuses to play the game. The promiscuous of both sexes will take their cheap shots at one another, disguising infidelity and selfishness as freedom and independence, and blaming the aftermath on one another. But no one can claim control over a virgin. Virginity is not a matter of asserting power in order to manipulate. It is a refusal to exploit or be exploited. That is real, and responsible, power.

But there is more to it than mere escape. There is an undeniable appeal in virginity, something that eludes the resentful feminist’s contemptuous label of “prude.” A virgin woman is an unattainable object of desire, and it is precisely her unattainability that increases her desirability. Feminism has told a lie in defense of its own promiscuity, namely, that there is no sexual power to be found in virginity. On the contrary, virgin sexuality has extraordinary and unusual power. There’s no second-guessing a virgin’s motives: her strength comes from a source beyond her transitory whims. It is sexuality dedicated to hope, to the future, to marital love, to children, and to God. Her virginity is, at the same time, a statement of her mature independence from men. It allows a woman to become a whole person in her own right, without needing a man either to revolt against or to complete what she lacks. It is very simple, really: no matter how wonderful, charming, handsome, intelligent, thoughtful, rich, or persuasive he is, he simply cannot have her. A virgin is perfectly unpossessable. Of course, there have been some women who have attempted to claim this independence from men by turning in on themselves and opting for lesbian sexuality instead. But this is just another, perhaps deeper, rejection of their femaleness. The sexes rightly define themselves in their otherness. Lesbianism squelches the design of otherness by drowning womanhood in a sea of sameness, and in the process loses any concept of what makes the female feminine. Virginity upholds simply and honestly that which is valuable in and unique to women.

The corollary of power is choice. Again, the feminist assumes that sexually powerful women will be able to

choose their own fates. And again, it is a lie. No one can engage in extramarital sex and then control it. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the moral nightmare of our society's breakdown since the sexual revolution. Some time ago I saw on TV the introduction of the groundbreaking new "female condom." A spokeswoman at a press conference celebrating its grand opening declared joyously the new freedom that it gave to women. "Now women have more bargaining power," she said. "If a man says that he refuses to wear a condom, the woman can counter, fine, I will!" I was dumbstruck by her enthusiasm for the dynamics of the new situation. Why on earth would two people harboring so much animosity towards each other contemplate a sexual encounter? What an appealing choice they have been given the freedom to make!

The dark reality, of course, is that it is not free choice at all when women must convince men to love them and must convince themselves that they are more than just "used goods." There are so many young women I have known for whom freely chosen sexual activity means a brief moment of pleasure—if that—followed by the unchosen side effects of paralyzing uncertainty, anger at the man involved, and finally a deep self-hatred that is impenetrable by feminist analysis. So-called sexual freedom is really just proclaiming oneself to be available for free, and therefore without value. To "choose" such freedom is tantamount to saying that one is worth nothing.

Admittedly, there are some who say that sex isn't anything nearly so serious or important, but just another recreational activity not substantially different from ping-pong. I don't believe it for a second. I learned most meaningfully from another woman the destructive force of sexuality out of control when I myself was under considerable pressure to cave in to a man's sexual demands. I discussed the prospect with this friend, and after some time she finally said to me, "Don't do it. So far in life you've made all the right choices and I've made all the wrong ones. I care enough about you that I don't want to see you end up like me." Naturally, that made up my mind. Sex does matter; it matters a lot; and I can only hope that those who deny it will wake up to their error before they damage themselves even more.

It is appalling that feminism has propagated lies so destructive to women. It has created the illusion that there is no room for self-discovery outside of sexual behavior. Not only is this a grotesque lie, but it is also an utterly *boring* one. Aside from its implied dismissal of all the world's many riches outside the sexual domain, this false concept has placed stultifying limitations on the range of human relationships. We're told that friendships between men and women are just a cover until they leap into the sack together. While romance is a natural and commendable expression of love between women and men, it is simply not the only

option. And in our sexually competitive climate, even romantic love barely deserves the title. Virginity among those seeking marital love would go far to improve the latter's solidity and permanence, creating an atmosphere of honesty and discovery *before* the equally necessary and longed-for consummation. Where feminism sees freedom from men by placing body parts at their disposal in a bizarre game of self-deception, virginity recognizes the equally vulnerable though often overlooked state of men's own hearts and seeks a way to love them for real.

It is puzzling and disturbing to me that regnant feminism has never acknowledged the empowering value of virginity. I tend to think that much of the feminist agenda is more invested in the culture of groundless autonomy and sexual Darwinism than it is in genuinely uplifting women. Of course, virginity is a battle against sexual temptation, and popular culture always opts for the easy way out instead of the character-building struggle. The result is superficial women formed by meaningless choices, worthy of stereotype, rather than laudable women of character, worthy of respect.

Perhaps virginity seems a bit cold, even haughty and heartless. But virginity hardly has exclusive claim on those defects, if it has any claim at all. Promiscuity offers a significantly worse fate. I have a very dear friend who, sadly, is more worldly-wise than I am. By libertine feminist standards she ought to be proud of her conquests and ready for more, but frequently she isn't. The most telling insight about the shambles of her heart came to me once in a phone conversation when we were speculating about our futures. Generally they are filled with exotic travel and adventure and PhDs. This time, however, they were not. She admitted to me that what she really wanted was to be living on a farm in rural Connecticut, raising a horde of children and embroidering tea towels. It is a lovely dream, defiantly unambitious and domestic. But her short, failed sexual relationships haven't taken her any closer to her dream and have left her little hope that she'll ever attain it. I must be honest here: virginity hasn't landed me on a farm in rural Connecticut, either. Sexual innocence is not a guarantee against heartbreak. But there is a crucial difference: I haven't lost a part of myself to someone who has subsequently spurned it, rejected it, and perhaps never cared for it at all.

I sincerely hope that virginity will not be a lifetime project for me. Quite the contrary, my subversive commitment to virginity serves as preparation for another commitment, for loving one man completely and exclusively. Admittedly, there is a minor frustration in my love: I haven't met the man yet (at least, not to my knowledge). But hope, which does not disappoint, sustains me.

The Bride and the Ten Commandments

By Susan A. Cyre

The Ten Commandments continue to be important to us 3500 years after God gave them to Israel because they frame our response to the marriage covenant that God entered into with Israel and that Christ forms with the church. Living as the wife of God in the Old Testament and the bride of Christ in the New Testament produces changed behavior in the bride in response to the nature of her husband. The Ten Commandments (or “Words”), are spoken by a husband [God] to his wife [Israel] and express how God and his wife will live together because of who he is—his nature, character and works.

God first announces the marriage covenant in Exodus 6:7 when God declares that he will free the people from bondage and will take Israel for his wife. God tells Israel, “I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God.” This is the form of an Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) marriage covenant— “I will be your husband and you will be my wife.”

The Exodus 6 text continues with God promising to bring his bride to a home in the Promised Land. The purpose of this home is so that God might dwell there with his bride. After the covenant is consummated in Exodus 24, God gives Moses the detailed plans for the tabernacle as the place, “that I might dwell among them.”¹ God desires to dwell with his people, as a husband dwells with his wife and loves and cares for her; communing with her in intimacy—each knowing and loving the other.

But Israel was not willing to be a faithful wife. Her sin is described sometimes graphically in Scripture as prostituting and adulterating herself after other lovers. God accuses both the Northern and Southern kingdoms of adultery saying, “Return, faithless people...for I am your husband” (Jer 3:14). God speaks through the prophet Isaiah saying, “For your Maker is your husband—the LORD Almighty is his name...” (Is 54:5); and “I was a husband to them, declares the Lord...” (Jer 31:32).

God speaks at length of his marriage to Israel in Ezekiel 16 describing the covenant he made and the lavish, tender care and blessing he gave to his bride. But Israel turned away from her husband and committed adultery. God says, “You adulterous wife! You prefer strangers to your own husband.”² She even sacrificed God’s children to idols, “You took your sons and daughters whom you bore to me and sacrificed them as food to the idols. Was your prostitution not enough? You slaughtered my children and sacrificed them to the idols.”³

God tells Hosea to go and marry the prostitute, Gomer, and when she commits adultery, to buy her back as a living illustration of God’s forgiving, redeeming love for his sinful wife, Israel.

The giving of the Ten Words follows Exodus 19 and the tender statement of God’s action in freeing the people from slavery and his invitation for them to be joined with him forever. God asks Israel for her hand in marriage. It is not a coerced request because Israel has already been freed from her bondage in Egypt. It is a statement of God’s love for her, his choosing of her, and a request that she choose him and bind herself to him. God says,

You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all the nations you will be my treasured possession....”⁴

Israel willingly, even eagerly, accepts God’s marriage proposal and answers, “We will do everything Yahweh has said” (Ex. 19:8). This is Israel’s “Declaration of Intent.” Wedding ceremonies performed today that use the *Book of Common Worship* still include a “Declaration of Intent” in which both the bride and groom affirm their “desire and intention to enter the covenant.” The minister asks, “John, understanding that God has created, ordered, and blessed the covenant of marriage, do you affirm your desire and intention to

enter this covenant?" John says "I do." Then the same question is asked of Mary and she also states her intent. This statement of willingness to enter into the marriage covenant precedes the vows and shows that neither the bride nor groom has been coerced.

After Israel states her willingness to enter into this marriage covenant with Yahweh, the nation consecrates itself—sets itself apart—in preparation for the marriage ceremony. Then the marriage takes place. This first Word is the marriage covenant vow—"I am the LORD your God or "I am Yahweh your husband." This is a shortened version of the full formulaic ANE marriage covenant language promised in Exodus 6, "I will be your God and you will be my people"—"I will be your husband and you will be my wife." The longer version appears almost 50 times in the Old and New Testaments.⁵ The relationship between God and his people, Yahweh and his bride, is one of revelation and response, action and thanksgiving, giving love and responding in love.

Interestingly, Yahweh's words to Israel that "[I] brought you to myself" are echoed in Jesus' statement to the disciples at the last supper when he compares himself to the bridegroom who is going to prepare a place for his bride and then he will "come again and receive you to Myself."⁶

The purpose of this marriage covenant is two-fold. First, it is so that Yahweh might dwell with his bride in communion and fellowship. Yahweh gives his bride a home in the Promised Land and he gives Moses instructions on building the tabernacle where he will dwell with his people.

Second, this marriage union with God will transform Israel. As Israel comes to "know" her husband, and responds to his character and actions, she will become like the One she loves. God describes this process of transformation negatively through Hosea the prophet when Israel chases after idols, "they consecrated themselves to that shameful idol and became as vile as the thing they loved."⁷

Scripture records the sad decline of Israel into adultery as Israel joined herself to the pagan gods of the neighboring nations. The story is not finished however, God promises through Jeremiah the prophet to make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah in Jeremiah 31:32-33. As the New Testament opens, the Gospel writer John explains that the One who was in the beginning with God and is God, has now come in flesh to "dwell among us." Jesus came so that the bride might "know" her husband.

Jesus identifies himself as the bridegroom in Matthew 9:15 and John refers to Jesus as the bridegroom in John 3:29. At the last supper, Jesus comforts his disciples

with a glimpse of the future. He identifies himself with the bridegroom in a Jewish marriage rite telling his disciples, "In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."⁸ In a Jewish marriage rite, the man becomes engaged and then goes back to his father's house to add on a room for he and his bride to dwell in together. When the room is finished he comes to take his bride to his father's house where they will live together.

Paul explicitly teaches that Christ is the bridegroom of the church and gave his life for her in Ephesians 5. And John sees the heavens part in Revelation at the end of the age and is shown the marriage of the Lamb.

Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready.... 'Write: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!'⁹

The consummation of all history occurs when God dwells with his bride in the home he provides, the new Jerusalem. John sees a new heaven and a new earth,

I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling [tabernacle] of God is with men, and he will live [tabernacle] with them. They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'¹⁰

Finally, salvation history is complete. The marriage has taken place as the marriage covenant is once again repeated, "They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God." The bride now dwells with her husband and every hindrance and sin is removed. The husband gives his bride a new home in the new Jerusalem where they will dwell together. And the promise of Genesis is restored. The bride is in the image of her husband and rules over creation with him forever.

The Ten Words have not changed since the Old Testament because God's character and intent have not changed. The Words still reveal God's nature, character and works. And our response should be as a wife to her husband. Now, however, in the new covenant, God has sent his Spirit to dwell in us to know God and be able to respond to him.

The First Word, "You shall have no other gods before me," restates the absolute singular devotion of this

marriage covenant. There can be no husbands “besides me” for God is a jealous husband and rightly so. God is Israel’s true husband who saved her, provided for her, healed her, gave her a home. He is the one who loves her. If Israel gives her love to an idol, she gives to another the loyalty and devotion that belong to Yahweh alone and she breaks the marriage covenant.

The Second and Third Words expound on the first. You are to love your husband Yahweh exclusively by not elevating idols to Yahweh’s position as husband. You shall not take God’s name in vain, and thereby lower Yahweh’s name and character to the level of useless idol. We are to know the living God as he truly is. We are not to imagine God as something we create nor are we to deny who he is by using his name falsely.

The Fourth Word to remember the Sabbath calls us to remember the power of God to create and rule and therefore we are to rest from our striving. To refuse to enter into rest is to profane God’s name by denying his ability to provide for all our needs. Our refusal to rest makes an idol of work as if our efforts will redeem and sustain us. Both work and rest are a gift of our loving husband. Both are to be enjoyed and entered into as we conform ourselves to his image.

In the Fifth Word, we honor our parents because they are God’s instruments of life-bearing. Duke University professor Stanley Hauerwas writes that, “our belly button keeps reminding us that all we have and all we are is a gift.”¹¹ Our parents were our first teachers of God’s love, will and work. To reject this Word is to make an idol of self. We misuse God’s name when we deny that God is the author of life and claim we are monarchs over our own lives, grateful to no one, unfettered by any bonds or ties.

The Sixth Word not to murder acknowledges that all life belongs to God. Human life bears the image of God and to destroy life profanes his name. The corollary is that we make an idol of power. Absolute power is ultimate control even over life itself.

The Seventh Word forbids adultery which includes every kind of sexual immorality. Because marriage is an image of God’s relationship with Israel and Christ’s with the church, to destroy human marriage is to profane God’s name. To commit adultery is to make an idol of pleasure.

The Eighth Word not to steal calls us to be content with all that our loving husband has provided for us. To steal is to say that either God does not own all that exists and therefore *cannot* distribute it as he chooses, or that he is not attentive and loving toward his bride and therefore *will not* supply her needs. To steal is to profane God’s name by denying his loving care for us. To break the Eighth commandment is to make an idol of possessions.

The Ninth Word not to bear false witness calls us to live as our beloved husband lives with us—in truth. We are to be assured that the sovereign Creator, our husband, rules over every circumstance. We blaspheme his name when we deny the world as it really is and instead create our own reality. God spoke and created reality. To lie is to make an idol of our intellect as if our thoughts and words can create a different truth.

The Tenth Word not to covet is a summary of the nine and calls us to recognize that all acts of idolatry begin with coveting what God has not given us. To love our husband, God, is to praise him for his blessings to us—his care and provision and mercy. To reject our husband is to blaspheme his name with our ingratitude as if his care and love have been inadequate to meet our needs and bring us joy.

The Ten Words frame our response to God’s marriage relationship with us. They also teach us about the meaning of human marriage covenants. Even though marriages today are egalitarian, the Ten Words teach us how a relationship in which God joins a man and a woman and makes them one looks and is lived out. In marriage, the man and woman are no longer autonomous individuals but have been joined into one. Human marriage between a man and a woman is to be an image of Christ’s union with the church.

¹ Exodus 25:8

² Ezekiel 16:32 NIV

³ Ezekiel 16:20-21 NIV

⁴ Exodus 19:4-6, NIV

⁵ Frank E. Gaebelien, General Editor, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, Regency, 1990, Vol 2, p.341.

⁶ John 14:3 NAS

⁷ Hosea 9:10b, NIV

⁸ John 14:2-3 NIV

⁹ Revelation 19:7-9 NIV

¹⁰ Revelation 21:2-4 NIV

¹¹ Stanley M. Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *The Truth about God: The Ten Commandments in Christian Life*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999) p. 72.

Significant Revisions of Chapter 14 of the Book of Order: On ordination

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This year presbyteries will be voting on a complete overhaul of Chapter 14 of the “Form of Government” portion of the *Book of Order*. The chapter is titled “Ordination, Certification, and Commissioning.” In addition, several related amendments to other parts of the *Book of Order* are proposed that parallel the changes in the rewrite of Chapter 14. We recommend defeat of these proposed changes.

The rewrite of Chapter 14 and the associated amendments are identified in the *List of Proposed Amendments* as 06-A and 06-B1; 06-B2; and 06-B3. The wording in the material is “If Amendment A.1. is approved, the following amendments [A sections] shall also be approved (page 27 of the *List of Proposed Amendments*).”

Substantive changes buried in a long document

The rationale provided for the proposed replacement for the entire G-14 chapter (“Ordination, Certification and Commissioning”) states the intent to make Chapter 14 “shorter and more flexible in favor of presbyteries.”

This objective was not achieved, since numerous significant changes were incorporated into the proposed wording. Substantive changes remain buried in this long document, making it difficult to see what the changes are and judge what effect they will have. The proposed changes ought to be considered as separate amendments that can be fully evaluated and judged on their individual merits. But presbyteries are receiving this wholesale for an up or down vote.

Some of the significant changes incorporated into the rewrite of Chapter 14

(1) **Blurring of the distinctions between officers and elevating of specialized church workers.** The significance of “ordination” to our offices of Deacon, Elder, and Minister of the Word and Sacrament is emphasized in the current Chapter 14. The proposed revision completely reorganizes the material, beginning with paragraphs describing “ordained ministry,” “certified ministry,” and “commissioned ministry” as though they are of parallel significance in our polity (compare the three paragraphs in the current G-14.0100 with the four paragraphs in the proposed G-14.0100).

The revision then intersperses Certified Christian Educator information and Commissioned Lay Pastor information in with the Deacon, Elder, and Minister of the Word and Sacrament information. This blurs the distinction between officers (Deacons, Elders, and Ministers of the Word and Sacrament) and specialized church workers.

(2) Changes status of Christian Educators to give it a status parallel to Minister of Word and Sacrament.

The proposed revision gives Certified Christian Educators a status parallel to Minister of the Word and Sacrament by adding the “constitutional questions” for Certified Christian Educators and constructing the final question to match most of the wording used in the final question for Minister of the Word and Sacrament (see proposed G-14.0330). In past votes on this matter, presbyteries have rejected conferring this parallel status on Christian Educators.

(3) Allows presbytery pre-emptive authority in dissolving pastoral relationships.

Although the current Chapter 14 of the Book of Order specifies that either the pastor or the congregation must initiate a request for dissolution of a pastoral relationship (current G-14.0501b), the proposed Chapter 14 revision allows the presbytery to dissolve a pastoral relationship without a request from the pastor or from the congregation. The wording in the proposed rewrite as G-14.0511 is:

...The call approved by the presbytery cannot be changed or dissolved except by consent of the presbytery, at the request of the pastor or associate pastor, at the request of the church by action of the congregation or when the presbytery, after consultation with the minister and the congregation, finds that the church’s mission under the Word imperatively demands it.

Although the current Form of Government does specify in G-11.0103 that the presbytery has power “to establish the pastoral relationship and to dissolve it at the request of one or both of the parties, or when it finds that the church’s mission under the Word imperatively demands it,” that concept is not found in the current chapter G-14 where dissolution of pastoral relationships is discussed.

Apparently the authors of the Chapter 14 rewrite found it extremely important to clearly establish this third path to dissolution because they also added as the proposed G-14.0613:

The presbytery, through its committee on ministry or an administrative commission, may inquire into reported difficulties in a congregation and may dissolve the pastoral relationship if, after consultation with the minister, the session, and the congregation (G-7.0304a(3)), it finds the church's mission under the Word imperatively demands it.

What congregation does not have “difficulties”? These provisions would certainly be seen as a threat to congregations and pastors that if they are out of step with the presbytery, their pastoral relationship could be in danger.

(4) Creation of “advisory handbooks” removes critical ordination content from the Book of Order. The proposed revision creates “advisory handbooks” to be developed by General Assembly agencies in consultation with the Office of the General Assembly. It removes most of the Inquiry process, Candidacy process, and oversight of the work of ministry from the *Book of Order*, placing them in “advisory handbooks.” Although the “advisory handbooks” are not binding on the presbyteries, the problem is that once material has been removed from the Book of Order and placed in the advisory handbooks, approval by the General Assembly and a majority of presbyteries would no longer be needed to change the requirements.

Presbyteries would be authorized to develop their own requirements and national unity would be lost, because we would end up with conflicting policies across the judicatories. A Form of Government with minimal content would leave a vacuum that would be filled, but the majority of the GA and the majority of the presbyteries would not be able to determine how it is filled, as they do now, since critical content would no longer be a part of the constitution.

(5) Pastoral relationships changed. The proposed revision changes the categories of pastoral relationships, allows new categories to be created to fit individual circumstances (proposed G-14.0550), and changes the wording describing procedures by which these relationships are established. For Associate Pastor, the revision removes the sentence, “The call to an associate pastor shall specify the particular functions to be fulfilled,” but retains the sentence, “An associate pastor shall be directed in his or her work by the pastor in consultation with the session” (see proposed G-14.0513).

The “A.2” group of amendments add changes to other chapters of the Form of Government that parallel the changes in the proposed rewrite of Chapter G-14. The three “A2a” amendments deal with “advisory handbooks.” Amendment A.2.a(1) adds a definition of “advisory handbooks” to the Preface of the Book of Order. Amendment A.2.a(2) adds a paragraph about

“advisory handbooks” to G-9. Amendment A.2.a(3) adds a paragraph on “advisory handbooks” to G-11.

Amendment A.2.b moves the section dealing with dissolution of relationship and renunciation of jurisdiction for deacons, elders, and Ministers of the Word and Sacrament from G-14 to G-6, but retains the current wording. Amendment A.2.c moves release from exercise of ordained office and restoration from G-11 and G-14 to G-6. The wording is less specific than the current Form of Government and makes restoration to ordained office much easier (dropping the requirement to reaffirm ordination vows and resume a ministry that qualifies for membership in the presbytery). Amendment A.2.d moves the section on employing ministers of other churches from G-14 to G-11, but retains the current wording. Amendment A.2.e removes information on validated ministry from G-14 and places reworded information in G-11.

All of these amendments are automatic with the acceptance of A.1, the rewrite of Chapter 14.

Problems with the other amendments:

Amendment B.1. moves the vows of office from Form of Government to Directory for Worship

Amendment B.1 would move all of the ordination and installation service information and the constitutional questions for officers out of the Form of Government section of the Book of Order and place them in the Directory for Worship. This was defeated previously and should be defeated again. Moving the constitutional questions to the Directory for Worship makes the questions appear to only be part of the liturgy to be used in a service of ordination and installation. The questions belong in the Form of Government to emphasize their importance as containing defining beliefs with which all officers must agree.

Amendment B.2. adds license to preach and limited license to administer the sacraments

Amendment B.2 would insert a section into G-14 which would allow a presbytery to grant to a candidate who had completed all requirements for ordination except the exams, a “license to preach” and a “limited license to administer the sacraments.” It is not appropriate for the sacraments to be administered by persons who are not ordained. Since a Minister of the Word and Sacrament would be assigned to the licensed person as a mentor and supervisor, that Minister of the Word and Sacrament would be the appropriate person to administer the sacraments for that congregation.

Commissioned Lay Pastors (who are required to be elders and therefore are ordained officers) can already be authorized to administer the sacraments and could provide another option for administering the sacraments in a small church without a pastor. Permitting presbyteries to grant such licenses would allow the functions of Minister of the Word and Sacrament to be performed by persons who may not meet the standards for ordination as a church officer, and could be abused as a way to circumvent those requirements.

Amendment B.3. removes synod approval for extraordinary exam process

Amendment B.3 would remove the need for synod approval from the alternative process created by a presbytery for a candidate who had failed one or more ordination exams twice. Although initially this seems innocuous, it is another example of presbyteries being granted expanded powers. The justification that “Synods often simply approve such processes without careful scrutiny” is a poor justification. Our polity wisely provides for higher governing body review and approval to ensure that standards are upheld and that requirements are similar between presbyteries.

Conclusion and Recommendation

While there are some portions of the *Book of Order* that could be more carefully crafted, no document is perfect. The Form of Government in its present state is very

usable. Expanded powers of the presbytery, woven throughout the proposed changes and paired with the proposed amendments to G-14, strengthen the power of a presbytery. Giving presbyteries power to “pre-emptively” dissolve a pastoral relationship when neither the pastor nor the congregation had requested it raises the possibility for chilling scenarios.

For example, if a session does not pay per capita, would that congregation receive “assistance” in the form of re-education from the presbytery with “authority” over its mission? If the session chooses to support primarily non-Presbyterian Church (USA) missionaries, would that congregation need “assistance” in the form of re-education from the presbytery? If the presbytery did not succeed in re-educating the session to conform to the presbytery’s perspective, would those actions result in the presbytery determining that the relationship between the pastor and that congregation needs to be dissolved?

No one can know what the effect of the changes would be, and that is precisely the problem. To authorize such radical changes would only serve to upset the peace and unity of the church and would be a significant and needless distraction from the work of ministry so desperately needed in our congregations and our culture. All of the proposed items of business related to amending Chapter 14 should be disapproved.

Research for this article was provided by Carol Shanholtzer, an elder at Faith Presbyterian Church in Minnetonka, Minnesota

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