

The Church, Gay Marriage, and Different Christian Positions

What Has the PC(USA) Done?

In 1978 the General Assembly (GA) of Presbyterian Church (USA) approved an “Authoritative Interpretation” (AI) of the constitution (the Book of Confessions and the Book of Order) which was largely Johnson’s “toleration” position outlined below, with some concern also for protection of civil rights for gays. This position has also been called “Welcoming But Not Affirming.”

In 2010 the GA voted to amend the Book of Order to allow greater freedom of conscience for individual churches to ordain gay officers and pastors who were in committed partnerships. The proposed amendment was approved by a majority of the Presbyteries in 2011. The GA also voted that the 1978 AI no longer represents the teaching of the Presbyterian Church (USA). No replacement AI or position was approved.

In 2014 the GA approved another AI which allows pastors and churches in states where same-sex marriage is legal to choose whether or not to participate in or host same-sex marriages. It also voted to amend the Book of Order to replace the current definition marriage between “*a man and a woman*” to read, “*Marriage is a gift God has given to all humankind for the well-being of the entire human family. Marriage involves a unique commitment between two people, traditionally a man and a woman, to love and support each other for the rest of their lives. The sacrificial love that unites the couple sustains them as faithful and responsible members of the church and the wider community.*”

In an article “Our Challenging Way: Faithfulness, Sex, Ordination, and Marriage,” Barry Ensign-George and Charles Wiley of the Office of Theology and Worship say that we have “*decided not to declare as a denomination whether under certain conditions, marriage or some form of clear commitment, same-gender sexual relationships are to be regarded as faithful and holy.*” They suggest that this path of seeking unity without uniformity, while challenging, is a good Presbyterian response and may be a gift in this discussion.

Why Is This Issue So Difficult?

The issues around of same-gender relationships are complicated. There are questions of Biblical interpretation and application, questions about orientation and behavior, about morality and holiness, about legal issues and civil rights, and about identity and shame.

In his book, Bible, Gender, Sexuality Jim Brownson has a powerful chapter on shame and its impact on gay young people. Guilt is about what we do, but shame is about who we are, and runs much deeper. Crisis by Mitchell Gold tells 40 stories of pain and trauma experienced by young people who are gay.

There are also cultural influences both past and present that impact the thinking of all positions, often unconsciously. God and the Gay Christian by Matthew Vine is the best non-academic summary of the biblical case for an affirming position. Richard Hays chapter on homosexuality in The Moral Vision of the New Testament is the best summary of the non-affirming but welcoming position.

What Are the Different Christian Positions?

Stacy Johnson’s book A Time To Embrace argues that a variety of positions on homosexuality can be supported by different interpretations of Scripture. He examines 6 different positions by looking at the way they deal with both specific Biblical references to homosexuality and the larger Biblical themes of creation, reconciliation, and redemption, and then makes his own constructive 7th proposal. Individual members and staff members of First Presbyterian Church hold different positions along Johnson’s typology.

“Non-Affirming” Positions (Assume that all homosexual sexual acts are sinful):

- 1) Prohibition** – Believe that the Bible teaches that homosexuality is a sin which should be clearly condemned. Often no distinction is drawn between orientation and practice. Homosexuality is sometimes inaccurately conflated with Pedophilia. Often express concern that we listen to the Bible and not culture.
- 2) Toleration (Or Welcoming But Not Affirming)** – Makes a distinction between homosexual orientation and homosexual practice. Welcomes those with homosexual orientation into life and leadership of church, but prohibits the practice of homosexuality by officers. This position teaches that gays should remain celibate and typically does not endorse gay marriage. Parallels are sometimes drawn with alcoholism – an urge that is natural but must be resisted.
- 3) Accommodation** – Lesser of two evils argument. Homosexual practice is not endorsed, but it is recognized that a lifetime committed partnership may be preferable to promiscuity if celibacy is not possible. Some would support civil unions or even same-sex marriage, but do not believe the church can bless these partnerships. Some parallels to the church’s position on divorce, which is not endorsed by the church, but is accepted in some situations as the lesser of two evils.

“Affirming” Positions (Assume that some homosexual relationships may be faithful):

All three of these “affirming” positions understand specific biblical condemnations of homosexuality as either reflecting the time and place in which Scripture was written, similar to passages telling women to be silent in church and slaves to obey their masters, or as addressing specific types of homosexual practice different from committed life time partners.

- 1) Legitimation** – Focus is on protecting civil rights. Gays should be accepted for who they are and should not be discriminated against in either society or the church. Recent debates on gay marriage have centered around the rights and privileges marriage brings, and whether gay partners can be denied these rights and privileges.
- 2) Celebration** – Homosexuality is understood as a part of the created order and so gay partnerships should be accepted and celebrated. Focus may be on “gay pride.”
- 3) Liberation** – Recognizes that some people, such as those who are “transgendered” or “asexual” don’t fall neatly into either category of homosexual or heterosexual. Seeks to protect and value such people who are at the “fringes of the fringe.” This position has pushed for the expansion of gay and lesbian issues to LGBT, and then LGBTQIA (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, Queer or Questioning, Intersex, and Asexual or Ally)

Johnson’s Constructive Proposal (Seeks to Draw from Both to Balance Affirming and Ordering):

7) Affirming and Ordering – Recognizes that some people are homosexual, not by conscious choice but through complicated mix of nature and nurture, and are unlikely to change this orientation. Such people should be encouraged either to remain celibate or to form a life time committed partnership. Sexual immorality by both homosexuals and heterosexuals is condemned. This position believes that gays who are celibate or in a committed partnership should be able to be ordained as officers in the church. It increasingly also supports gay marriage, though some prefer “covenant unions” to preserve some distinction between heterosexual and homosexual partnerships.