

## THE BIBLE, HOMOSEXUALITY, AND GRACE

Scriptures: Acts 15:1-6, 7-21

The minute I invited people to submit questions of faith, I knew this question would come up: What is the Presbyterian Church's teaching on homosexuality? The person also asked about abortion and gun control, but I will leave that for another time. Homosexuality has been without doubt the most intensely debated issue in the Presbyterian Church and in other churches for more than 20 years.

But this is not the first time the church has faced a difficult, controversial question. In the first 50 years of the Christian church, the most hotly debated issue was circumcision. The book of Acts tells about the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas among Gentiles in Syria and Turkey, many of whom became Christians and were baptized. But in Acts 15:1 it says, "Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.'" The requirement to be circumcised is right there in the Bible: Genesis 17:10, where the Lord says to Abraham, "This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised."

In Acts 15:2 we read, "And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders." The Greek word for elder is the word *presbuteros*, from which we get the word "Presbyterian." What we have here in Acts 15 is the first Presbyterian General Assembly. Here is how they dealt with the first church controversy.

(Read Acts 15:6-21, NT, p. 134)

In the history of the church there are two ways that Christians have dealt with controversy. One is to split. In the Spokane Yellow pages there are listings for 62 different Christian denominations. That is not 62 different churches; that is 62 different denominations. There are also about 70 independent churches not affiliated with any denomination. Every one of those churches and denominations split from others because they disagreed about something.

But the first century church did not split. They did not threaten to take their pledges and go home. They met together to try to discern God's will. They believed—and this is where I think we have something to learn—they believed that if others in the church disagreed with you, maybe God was trying to tell them something. Or maybe God wanted to use you to tell them something. Either way you can't be sure until you meet and pray and study the Bible together.

That is what happened at this first General Assembly. Peter began by sharing the story of how God gave the Holy Spirit to a Gentile named Cornelius and to his family without requiring that they be circumcised. Then Peter makes a very important point. He says in verse 11, "We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."

Then James gets up to speak. James has been studying the Bible. He knows the commandments in the Old Testament about being circumcised, but he also discovers these words from the prophet Amos, where the Lord says,

After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; from its ruins I will rebuild it, and I will set it up, so that all other peoples may seek the Lord—even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called.

Here is a scripture passage that says uncircumcised Gentiles may be called into the family of God just like circumcised Jews. The apostles and the elders talked about that and finally agreed not to make circumcision a requirement for coming into the church.

Last month Robin preached a sermon about why Presbyterians ordain women as ministers, elders, and deacons. The process of coming to that decision was actually similar to the process we read about here in Acts 15. First, the church became aware of women who seemed to be called to ministry or to leadership as elders or deacons, and who displayed all the gifts needed for these offices. But some in the church opposed this, citing verses like I Corinthians 14:34: “Women should be silent in the churches.” So Presbyterians met together in a General Assembly, actually a whole series of General Assemblies, to discuss this issue and pray and study the scriptures. And as they studied the Bible they discovered some interesting things. They discovered that earlier in I Corinthians Paul tells the women in church to prophesy with their heads covered. To prophesy is like preaching. Paul did not tell them to keep silent, he just told them to dress respectfully for that culture when they preached. The more Presbyterians got together and studied the Bible, the more they noticed things in the Bible they had not noticed before. They noticed that many leaders in the early church were women, and none of them were told to keep silent. They concluded that the silence in I Corinthians 14 was not intended for all women in all situations but for a particular situation in Corinth where for whatever reason women were being disruptive. They approved the ordination of women as ministers, elders, and deacons, because 1) the Holy Spirit seemed to be calling them and gifting them for that role, and 2) the Bible, I Corinthians 14 notwithstanding, seemed to support it. By the way, that process took decades. Things do not happen fast in the Presbyterian Church.

Now let’s look at the issue of homosexuality. For at least 20 years the Presbyterian Church in General Assembly after General Assembly has considered the church’s stance toward self-affirming practicing homosexuals. We have listened to each other and prayed and studied the scriptures together. One key point in the debate has been the same one made by Peter in Acts 15:11—“We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus just as they will.” That is a bottom line of the gospel: we are saved by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ, not through our perfect lives or flawless character.

On one of the Questions of Faith inserts this question was asked: “If a person came to our church with a partner of the same sex in a committed relationship, how should we react?” The answer is welcome them. Welcome them! Grace means you don’t have to pass certain qualifications to be accepted by God. We are accepted by the free gift of forgiveness and eternal life given to us through God’s Son Jesus Christ. That is the only basis on which any of us are here. The requirement to be a member of our church or any Presbyterian Church is that you turn

to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and Savior and intend to follow him as part of a church family.

However, the minute we commit our lives to follow Jesus, he begins to work on us. Jesus accepts us as we are, but never leaves us that way. He begins to challenge us and to reshape our attitudes and actions. As we read the scriptures and hear God's word, God works on us, slowly shaping in us the live Jesus came to give.

And that is where the Presbyterian Church has struggled with the issue of homosexuality, not whether to accept a self-affirming practicing homosexual as a member, but whether to ordain a self-affirming practicing homosexual as an officer in the church. The Presbyterian Church has struggled with this, because after years of reading and re-reading the scriptures concerning homosexuality, the church as whole has not found scriptures anywhere in the Bible that seem to support a homosexual lifestyle.

That is the difference between the issue of homosexuality and the issue of circumcision or the issue of women in ministry. In the case of circumcision, the early Christian church re-read the Bible and discovered numerous places where God clearly wanted to bring Gentiles, uncircumcised Gentiles, into the family of Christ. In the same way the Presbyterian Church re-read the Bible and discovered numerous places where God authorized and accepted the ministry of women. But the Presbyterian Church as a whole has repeatedly studied the Bible on the issue of homosexuality and has yet to find any convincing scriptures to support a homosexual lifestyle as something God may want for us in Jesus Christ.

This is especially striking because many laws in the Old Testament are superseded in the New Testament. For example, in the Old Testament there are certain dietary laws—laws about not eating certain foods like pork. But in the New Testament Jesus says, “It is not what goes into a person that defiles him but what comes out of the person,” and Mark's gospel adds, “Thus he declared all foods clean” (Mark 7:19). In the New Testament Jesus basically threw out the laws in the Old Testament about clean and unclean food. That's why Christians can eat pork.

There are also other laws in the Old Testament, such as laws in the book of Leviticus against planting two different kinds of seed in your field or wearing clothes made from two different kinds of thread. These laws are simply ignored in the New Testament. They are no longer considered to be relevant. But that is not true about the laws on sexual relationships. The Old Testament book of Leviticus has laws clearly prohibiting homosexual relationships. But unlike many other laws in Leviticus, these laws are reaffirmed in the New Testament, specifically in Romans 1:26-27, I Corinthians 6:9, and I Timothy 1:10.

For these reasons the Presbyterian Church in its official policy has made a distinction. All who turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as Lord and Savior and who want to follow him as part of a church family are welcome. A self-affirming practicing homosexual is welcome to be a member of our church, because we are all saved by grace and we are all a work in progress. We are all on a journey toward becoming the people that God wants us to be.

But when it comes to ordaining leaders in the church—elders, deacons, or ministers—the church sets a higher standard. The church asks people in these positions to give a little clearer picture of the life God wants to have in Christ. It does not mean they are perfect. God knows that elders, deacons, and ministers are not perfect. But they are supposed at least to point us the in the right direction. So the Book of Order, the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) states this requirement:

Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a women or chastity in singleness (G-6.0106b).

In other words, ordained officers are to abstain from sexual relations except within the relationship of marriage between a man and a woman.

That is the official position of the Presbyterian Church (USA). Will that ever be changed? I don't know. The Book of Order is not the Word of God. It is only the best understanding of it that we in the Presbyterian Church up to this point. But we are still reading the Bible, we are still praying, we are still meeting and discussing this issue. The Holy Spirit may yet open our eyes to see things in the Bible we are missing, just as it has in the past.

But here is the point: if you get mad and leave the church, you will miss out on how God may lead us in the future. Because one thing is sure. We have a better chance of understanding the scriptures and discerning God's will for our lives, if we do it together than if we try to do it alone. And that is why we should hang in there with each other and keep studying.

- Ken Onstot