

SEXUALITY OVERTURES – CHURCH DOCTRINE REPORTS
WHERE FROM HERE? AN EXPLORATION OF POSSIBLE WAYS FORWARD FOR THE
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN CANADA ON QUESTIONS OF HUMAN SEXUALITY

(A&P 2017, p. 536–40, 28)

Background

The Committee on Church Doctrine has prepared two substantial theological and scriptural study papers on the question of human sexuality, for presentation to this General Assembly. These two study papers offer alternative theological and scriptural approaches to this question and represent the kind of serious theological work that the committee has always tried to undertake in answering questions referred to it. The Committee on Church Doctrine is also asking the General Assembly to send these two documents for study and report by sessions, presbyteries, synods and other bodies of the church. This request for study and report by the committee is intended to deepen and enrich our discussions with one another, trusting that the Spirit will bless us with wisdom and grace as we continue to discern the mind of Christ.

Moving Forward: The committee also recognizes that the church’s present, prayerful discussion of human sexuality must lead finally to a decision about what we will do – about how we will proceed. It is a question of how the church will finally respond to overtures that have invited the church to “full inclusion” of those who identify as LGBTQ, and overtures that have alternatively asked the church to reaffirm its present teaching. It is not only a question of scriptural or theological reflections, then, but also a question of what action we will take.

In order to move to facilitate conversation on these more practical issues and questions, the Committee on Church Doctrine has produced this brief document, entitled “Where from Here?”. It includes a sketch of three possible options for the church moving forward. We believe that these three options flow from and are consistent with the theological and scriptural arguments articulated in the two major study papers we have prepared.

As we present these three possible options to the General Assembly, and invite study and report on them within the wider church, we wish to offer two important qualifications:

1. *These three options do not represent the only possible ways forward for the church.* We are not suggesting that the church must choose between these three options. Rather, we are suggesting that these represent logical possibilities – and, that presenting these to the church will facilitate our shared reflection on the more concrete and programmatic questions that the church will finally need to answer.
2. *The three options are not laid out in a comprehensive way.* We realize that many details would need to be worked on in relation to each option. However, these options are designed in such a way as to open up space for the church’s reflection and response. While reading them you may find yourself asking “What about *this*?” and “What about *that*?”, and it is just these questions we are inviting you to ask, and to share with us.

In order for the Committee on Church Doctrine to gather feedback from the wider church, a response form will be created by the committee – a form that we will ask individuals, sessions, presbyteries and other church bodies to complete in the process of study and report. Further details on the procedure for reporting back will be made available on the website of the denomination, and will be circularized through the General Assembly Office, should the General

Assembly decide to provide this opportunity for deeper reflection and continuing consultation as we move forward.

Repentance and Confession

In laying out the three options, below, the Committee on Church Doctrine wishes to highlight that each of these approaches can and should be imagined in conjunction with a process of confession and repentance. That is, individuals advocating for *any* of these three options can also believe that the church has failed to live up the call to repentance and confession that was included within the 1994 Statement on Human Sexuality, 6.23:

The church is called to be a welcoming, nurturing, loving and supportive community, a true church family, where all are welcomed, nurtured, loved, and supported. Sadly, the Christian church has frequently shunned homosexuals and failed to minister to them and with them. The church as a whole must repent of its homophobia and hypocrisy.

Accordingly, you will observe that each of the three options presented includes a prospective recommendation that the General Assembly acknowledge the church's failure to follow the path of repentance and confession envisaged in 1994. In this vein, we also offer a reminder that the Committee on Church Doctrine, together with the Life and Mission Agency, has brought a recommendation to this General Assembly that is intended to initiate a process of listening and confession.

Three Options

The three options for the way forward are presented, below, in the form of recommendations that might be brought to a future General Assembly. Any decision that the church takes on questions of human sexuality will be taken precisely by way of recommendations to the General Assembly, and so we believe it is helpful to present the three options in just that form. While the recommendations presented under each option are in many ways self-explanatory, we will offer a brief description of each, here, to introduce them.

Option A represents a decision that what the church has previously taught on questions of human sexuality is faithful to the teachings of scripture and to the theological heritage that is ours in the Reformed tradition – further, it entails a re-affirmation by the General Assembly of what the church has historically taught on these questions. Following this path would include a process of listening and confession for homophobic actions and attitudes, and would imply hospitality toward those who identify as LGBTQ – all are loved in Christ and welcomed in the church. But this option would not involve any practice of blessing same sex relationships or of providing for the marriage of same sex couples. Ordination as a ruling or teaching elder would be possible only for those who are single or celibate, or to those who are married (where marriage is an opposite-sex relationship).

Option B represents a decision that what the church has previously taught on questions of human sexuality does not attend to the overall arc of scripture toward the welcome and inclusion of all people within the Christian community – including and especially those whose identity does not fit within a traditional heterosexual framework. Following this path entails a redefinition of marriage, in relation to our subordinate standards (Living Faith and the Westminster Confession), as a relationship between two persons rather than simply between a man and a woman. Here there is also a change with respect to ordination, since ordination becomes possible for those who are single or married (whether that marriage is same sex or opposite-sex in nature). This option also imagines freedom of conscience and action for those

who disagree with this change in church teaching – meaning, among other things, that teaching elders would not be compelled to solemnize same sex marriages.

Option C represents a decision that newer biblical and theological reflections on marriage and human sexuality do not present a compelling case, and that the church's teachings should not change. However, this option also recognizes that the church is divided on these questions, and creates space for those who can no longer accept the church's traditional teaching on human sexuality. Following this path entails the creation of a liturgy for the blessing of same sex relationships (which is not a marriage ceremony) and allows sessions to use this liturgy, and teaching elders to preside in this liturgy, should they wish to do so. Within this option, it is also imagined that ordination as a teaching and ruling elder would become possible for those in same sex relationships, provided they had received the blessing provided for within the new liturgy.

The three options (In the form of possible recommendations to a future General Assembly)

Option A:

1. That the General Assembly reaffirm the 1994 Statement on Human Sexuality as a faithful and biblical understanding of how we are to live as sexual and relational beings.
2. That the General Assembly affirm the "Historical Classical Paper" as a faithful, new statement of Christian discipleship and human sexuality.
3. That the General Assembly affirm that faithful sexual intimacy can only be lived within marriage (as defined by this option), and that this understanding of sexual intimacy must be attended to in decisions about who may be ordained as ruling or teaching elder in The Presbyterian Church in Canada.
4. That the General Assembly acknowledge that The Presbyterian Church in Canada has failed to undertake the work of repentance and confession for homophobic actions and attitudes, to which it pledged itself in adopting the 1994 Statement on Human Sexuality.

Option B:

1. That the General Assembly affirm the document "What the Bible teaches on Covenant Monogamous Same-Sex Relationships" as a faithful theological and biblical statement on the nature of human identity and sexuality.
2. That the Presbyterian Church in Canada redefine marriage as a relationship between two persons, and that our confessional tradition (Living Faith and the Westminster Confession) be amended to reflect this change.
3. That the Committee on Church Doctrine, in consultation with the Life and Mission Agency, adapt the present marriage liturgies of the denomination to reflect the definition of marriage as a relationship between two persons.
4. That the General Assembly affirm that faithful sexual intimacy can only be lived within marriage (as defined by this option), and that this understanding of sexual intimacy must be attended to in decisions about who may be ordained as ruling or teaching elder in The Presbyterian Church in Canada.
5. That the Presbyterian Church in Canada grant freedom of conscience and action to ruling and teaching elders whose firmly held convictions will not allow them to affirm or solemnize marriage as a relationship between two persons of the same sex.

6. That the General Assembly acknowledge that The Presbyterian Church in Canada has failed to undertake the work of repentance and confession for homophobic actions and attitudes, to which it pledged itself in adopting the 1994 statement on human sexuality.

Option C:

1. That the General Assembly acknowledge that recent theological and scriptural arguments about human sexuality do not offer a compelling case for a change in the church's doctrine of marriage or its understanding of human sexuality, and that the General Assembly reaffirm marriage as the union of a man and a woman in Christ.
2. That the General Assembly acknowledge that there are some within The Presbyterian Church in Canada who believe firmly that the church should, in faithfulness to Christ, offer a full welcome to those who identify as LGBTQ, within the church.
3. That the General Assembly, through the Committee on Church Doctrine, prepare a liturgy for a prayerful blessing of committed same sex relationships, and that sessions and ministers be given freedom to use this liturgy in services of public worship.
4. That women and men who are living in committed same sex relationships, and who have received the blessing proposed in recommendation no. 3, above, be eligible for ordination as teaching and ruling elders.
5. That the General Assembly acknowledge that The Presbyterian Church in Canada has failed to undertake the work of repentance and confession for homophobic actions and attitudes, to which it pledged itself in adopting the 1994 Statement on Human Sexuality.

Study and Report

As we have stated above, it is important to note that these three options are not the only three available to the church. And it is important to note that each of them leaves numerous questions unanswered. The purpose of study and report is to seek the wisdom, creativity and critical reflection of the whole church as we consider the way forward as a denomination in relation to sisters and brothers who identify as LGBTQ.

As also indicated above, for the process of study and report, the Committee on Church Doctrine will prepare a form that all individuals and church bodies should use in offering their responses to "Where from Here?". This will greatly facilitate the work of the committee in reporting back to the next General Assembly on the substance of the church's reflections concerning possible ways forward.

Recommendation No. 4 (adopted, p. 28)

That the documents "The Historic Argument Concerning Human Sexuality" and "What the Bible teaches on Covenanted Monogamous Same-sex Relationships" be commended to the agencies, colleges, congregations, sessions, presbyteries, synods, committees and groups of The Presbyterian Church in Canada for study and response to the Committee on Church Doctrine through the General Assembly Office by January 31, 2018.

Recommendation No. 5 (adopted, p. 28)

That the document "Where from Here?" be sent to the agencies, colleges, congregations, sessions, presbyteries, synods, committees and groups and other bodies of The Presbyterian Church in Canada for study and report back to the Committee on Church Doctrine by January 31, 2018.