

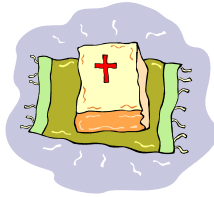


The SPC Post

March 2011
Volume V, Issue III
Spotsylvania Presbyterian Church

Denominational Update

By Alan Hager



Voting continues throughout the 173 presbyteries of the Presbyterian Church concerning ordination standards for officers of the church. In short, there is a vote to consider removing the clause in the denomination's constitution which currently requires prospective officers of the church "to live in fidelity within the covenant of marriage or chastity in singleness." Removing this clause would essentially allow for the official approval of ordination of persons who are sexually active outside the covenant of marriage.

As of February 22, the vote tally is 47 Yes, 35 No. There have been 8 presbyteries that switched their vote from previously supporting the fidelity/chastity clause to currently voting to have it replaced. It is clear that the vote will be very close either direction. You can follow the vote count online at www.presbycoalition.org. You can also find some very informative material at that site concerning the history of our denomination's actions on this ordination topic along with Biblical perspectives on the issues involved with these debates.

For newer people to our church and denomination (as well as for some of our seasoned veterans), there may be surprise about the issues being faced. I will offer some more background in the newsletter over the next few months in the form of some frequently asked questions on this topic. We will also keep a comprehensive list of these articles at the church website (www.spcontheweb.org).

For instance, some have wondered, *why do we single out the issue of homosexuality above others? Are we being mean-spirited or homophobic in seeking to maintain the current ordination standard?* Actually, the current ordination requirement is not about homosexuality exclusively. Both ongoing homosexual behavior as well as heterosexual behavior outside of marriage prevent individuals from being considered as officers of the church in the current wording of the Book of Order. Furthermore, the emphasis is on behavior -- not orientation. No one is precluded from being ordained as an officer of the church at this time based on orientation, areas of temptation, or inclinations.

Another response to this concern is that this issue has come to the moderates and conservatives within the church, the church did not go out looking for a controversy to fight. Specifically, some within the church have fought the ordination standard for 30 years by presenting multiple amendments to the Book of Order and advocating in various conferences and venues for a more open position on ordaining leaders. Those (like our congregation) that have spoken up for and worked to retain the current standard have been responding to the initiatives of these groups and individuals.

A similar concern to the previous one is, *aren't we all fallen in some way? Are we being judgmental by restricting ordination?* The response to these concerns is clear; we are all fallen and we are all in need of God's grace. Candidates for ordained office can acknowledge their sin, repent, and be considered for ministry positions in the church. The issue at stake is being willing to admit the behavior is a sin and not consistent with God's standard for life.

As we see in the debate over sexuality in our culture at large, the desire for many is to see in the church a justification of the actions of those who are not celibate in singleness (particularly those who are gay). And so the issue is not grace and concern for people in the midst of their sin, but tolerance and even endorsement of what the Bible calls sin. The church is to offer compassion and the opportunity for restoration, but it ought not to confuse God's standard of right and wrong.

We could compare this dynamic by substituting sexual activity with another behavior, say stealing. If a person struggled with temptations to steal, he could certainly be ordained as an officer of the church. The issue would be his behavior, whether or not he was stealing on a regular basis. He could also be a leader of the church if he had stolen in the past, but was willing to acknowledge he was wrong and seek God's grace and strength for the future to resist that particular sin. But if our imagined friend were to think that stealing was not wrong and he had no intentions of changing his behavior, then we would naturally conclude that he ought not to be considered as a potential officer in the church.

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Again, if a person is willing to repent and seek God's grace, there is great room for usefulness and participation as a leader of the church. The church is not being narrow or judgmental, but it is seeking to be true to God's revealed truth and standards. Also, it should be mentioned that this debate over the years in our denomination has focused upon leadership roles in the church, not participation in the life of the church. All are welcome to receive the support, instruction, and fellowship of the church. It is safe to say that many congregations, ours included, need to be more focused on reaching out to people and ministering to them wherever they may be in their faith and life. Without compromising our commitment to God's truth, there is plenty of room to minister to people in their brokenness and show compassion to all.

Let's pray for God's continued guidance and strength for our church and for His work throughout our denomination. Stay tuned for more updates next month.