

Who we are and what we believe

Last year the 172 Presbyteries of the Presbyterian Church (USA) by a vote of 97 to 75 endorsed an amendment to our Book of Order called Amendment "B." We in Seattle Presbytery voted in favor of that addition to the Book of Order. It called upon those being ordained as pastors, elders and deacons to live our daily lives by a discipleship standard that included these words:

"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 those standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman (W4.9001), or chastity in singleness. Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as deacons, elders or ministers of the Word and Sacrament."

At this year's General Assembly, a new amendment is being sent to Presbyteries for approval. Called Amendment "A," it will propose a revised wording of that standard by means of the following language:

"Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture and instructed by the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to demonstrate fidelity and integrity in marriage or singleness, and in all relationships of life. Candidates for ordained office shall acknowledge their own sinfulness, their need for repentance, and their reliance on the grace and mercy of God to fulfill the duties of their office."

The key word-change and addition is the word "integrity" in replacement for the word "chastity." A direct reference to



From Your Pastor

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to ethically validate an individual Christian's own behavior, choices before God, the church and the world. But integrity as openness before the gospel of grace and truth is not the same thing as discipleship lived under the gospel's authority of grace and truth.

When the vote on this new amendment comes before the Presbytery of Seattle I will not vote in favor of it because of this non-defined and non-discipleship use of the key word "integrity."

Some members of our Presbyterian church and other Protestant denominations, too, wonder why the debates about sexual ethics continue year after year. It is because we feel deeply the questions of sexual ethics today throughout our whole culture including the churches. Our task is not to avoid serious discussion on these themes but to keep our common

conformity to our confessions is also eliminated in this new proposed standard. I respect and treasure the word integrity when it means "congruence" as in Philippians 1:27, "Let your life be worthy of the gospel." But congruence is not the intended purpose of this word for many who use it. Instead it has become the word of self-affirmation and openness that is meant

life centered on Jesus Christ as the only one who both forgives us in His generous, affirming love and also calls us to the way of righteousness as our Lord. (John 8:1-12)

What this means for me as a Christian is that I need myself to be a biblically faithful Christian centered on the truth that is both kind and true. As Presbyterians we have an added good legacy to guide us in this calling and that is a great Book of Confessions. It is my goal to continually bring our confessions into my life as the wise guide that they are. The great creeds are the enduring standards of our Presbyterian confessional heritage.

The confessions begin with the Apostles Creed, which we examined as a church last fall, and continue through the Westminster, the Heidelberg, the Barmen Declaration, up to the recent Brief Statement of Faith. Each creed turns our eyes toward Jesus Christ and Holy Scripture. The greatness of our Presbyterian Church owes a profound debt to that creedal heritage which signals who we are and what we believe.

When people ask who we are as Presbyterians, say this: We are a people with a Book of Confession that calls us to be obedient to scripture, and in the scripture of the old and new testaments we have met our living Lord Jesus Christ who gives us life and hope. Now together in local congregations of real people in real places we are seeking to live out the generous love and the discipleship truth of Jesus Christ in the world. We have "bowed" twice; once in humble admission that we cannot save ourselves and, secondly, in gratitude to God for his grace toward and in us by His son Jesus Christ.

When a word like "integrity" means faithfulness to the biblical witness, then I love the word, but it must not be a word I control to fit my own special mandate or advocacy.