

How recent GA approved recommendations present a strong, biblical position on human sexuality.

Throughout both the Position Paper and the Pastoral Letter, we consistently point out the deep, heart-level nature of sin. Sin does not merely consist in outward behavior but also involves inward desires. These desires, even if not acted upon, are also considered sin. In fact, our sin runs even deeper than this. When we experience sinful desires, these are not implanted into us from the outside. They arise from our own hearts. We are sinfully corrupt, even before we are conscious of desiring anything sinful. From its deepest roots in our heart to its ripest fruit in our behavior, and everything in between, anything oriented toward sin is itself sin and sinful.

Here are some examples from the revised EPC statements:

From the Position Paper:

“We acknowledge that any sexual desires apart from God’s design for marriage are sinful, arise from our sinfully corrupted nature, and we must repent of them all. We also acknowledge that any temptations to fulfill sexual desire apart from God’s design for marriage must be resisted, regardless of how persistent or seemingly innate the temptation or desire is.”

From the Pastoral Letter:

“The human heart is sinfully corrupt and gives rise to disordered desires, which are also sin. Consequently, the corrupt heart, its lusts, and desires, including unbidden sinful thoughts, are to be repented of, mourned, and mortified. Same sex sexual lusts and desires are an example of such sin.”

The updates include greater clarity and biblical consistency when referring to Christians in terms of their sin struggles. While we ought to identify our sin, we ought not to be identified by it. Our identity is found in Christ, in whom we have forgiveness, in whom the reigning power of sin is broken such that we are dead to sin and alive to God, and in whom we have the promise and power to continue to grow in holiness. This is especially important in a cultural context that often absolutizes a distorted sexual “identity.” The recently approved updates walk the biblical line of clearly identifying sin while refusing to speak of Christians as though such sin were part of their essential identity. We may speak of Christians who “experience same-sex attraction,” but we should not adopt the language of “gay Christian.” For example: Phrases like “SSA person,” “those who are same-sex attracted,” and “SSA Christians” are replaced with the better “those who experience SSA [same-sex attraction]” and “Christians who experience SSA.”

From the Pastoral Letter:

“in our culture, the term ‘gay’ is normally understood as affirming or engaging in homosexual practice. Although the term ‘gay’ may refer to more than sexual activities and attractions to persons of the same sex, it does not communicate less than that. It is sinful to intentionally approve of sin and missionally foolish to invite that misunderstanding. Our identity is in Christ as his new creation, and we should not inadvertently communicate to the world that Jesus approves of sin. It is inappropriate to use terminology, including ‘gay Christian’, [sic] that welcomes confusion from the church and world.”

The statements reaffirm both biblical teaching and the EPC’s practice of insisting on the need for genuine repentance from sin while also recognizing the ongoing struggle against sin that every Christian continues to experience in this life. For example:

“While we welcome anyone to attend our churches and to participate in our various ministries, it is essential that our churches admit into their membership and into positions of leadership only those who have a credible testimony of repentant faith in Jesus Christ. People who knowingly and persistently adopt, practice, or promote sexual behaviors or desires in direct contradiction to biblical teaching and show no evidence of repentance do not have such a credible testimony. Such persons are to be loved and ministered to with pastoral care, but they are not eligible for either church membership or ordination. People who struggle with temptation and may, at times, sin sexually, but who grieve those failures, show ongoing repentance, and are progressing in sanctification, may be welcomed as members. They are to be shepherded pastorally and held accountable as they grow in holiness.”

A particularly challenging and pressing question is how all of this applies to people recommended for positions of leadership in the church, especially the offices of Deacon or Elder (which includes pastors). Throughout our life in this world, every Christian experiences an ongoing war against remaining sin down to its roots. In keeping with this, the approved statements affirm the highest expectation for experiential holiness among officers, even while they avoid the error of insisting on sin being utterly eradicated from their experience. Consider the following guidance:

From the Pastoral Letter:

*“Only those who conform to the biblical requirement of chastity and sexual purity in their descriptions of themselves, their convictions, character, and conduct should be considered for leadership. (WLC 138-139) [sic] If candidates for office have disclosed that they experience SSA [same-sex attraction], the examining elders must first confirm that the candidates have a long record of living chaste sexual lives in their identity, behavior, desires, and attitudes. **Ordination is not appropriate while habitual or unresolved sexual sin persists;***

discernment on the part of the court should be exercised in light of repentance, fruit of sanctification, and proven character over time. Courts may consider for ordination candidates whose ongoing experience of SSA is a corrupted sin nature unindulged, repented of, and mortified; a temptation not entered into, but rather fled; a weakness not embraced, but rather mourned as they rest upon the grace and strength of the Lord.”

In line with this, we passed a preliminary approval of the following additions to our **Book of Government**, all of which reassert the EPC’s continued reception of the biblical expectations for officers:

“Whether single or married, officers must conform to the biblical requirement of chastity and sexual purity (see Westminster Larger Catechism Q&A 138-139) in their descriptions of themselves, their convictions, character, and conduct... Officers in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church must be above reproach in their walk and Christlike in their character. While office bearers will see spiritual perfection only in glory, they will continue in this life to confess and to mortify remaining sins in light of God’s work of progressive sanctification. Therefore, to be qualified for office, they must affirm the sinfulness of fallen desires, the reality and hope of progressive sanctification, and be committed to the pursuit of Spirit empowered victory over their sinful temptations, inclinations, and actions.”

The above statements have been misunderstood and/or misrepresented in various websites and social media platforms, as well as in conversation and debate surrounding the approval of these statements. For example, the EPC has been accused of the following...“opening the door to homosexual ordination,” “approving gay ordination,” considering “gay, Side-B Christianity,” “ordaining celibate homosexuals,” “voting to allow ordination of celibate ‘same-sex attracted’ pastors,” and so forth.

These accusations have come both from outside the EPC as well as from within the denomination. **While many of the people who claim this have a godly concern for biblical faithfulness, these statements fundamentally mischaracterize what was considered and approved by the denomination.** The phrases “homosexual ordination” and “gay ordination” convey the idea that we have approved ordaining people who are engaged in homosexual practice. **This is explicitly forbidden in the EPC.** References to ordaining “celibate homosexuals” and “celibate ‘same sex attracted’ pastors” communicate that if someone’s inward desires remain unchanged and unaffected by repentance, they could still be ordained as long as they don’t engage in homosexual practice. **This is explicitly denied in the EPC’s statements.** Both repentance and saving change take place especially in the heart, not only in outward action. If someone experiences a sinful desire such as same-sex attraction but fails to identify it as sin, does not actively oppose it in dependence upon the grace of God, or has not experienced growth and change with respect to those desires, such a person is not allowed to be ordained in

the EPC. The term “Side-B” refers to an unbiblical, though sadly common, approach to homosexual sin in some churches. While agreeing with the historic, Christian understanding that homosexual practice is sinful, Side-B does not recognize the sinfulness of homoerotic desire itself. In fact, being “gay” is characterized as something inherently good and valuable to the church, rather than something to be turned from at the level of its deepest roots in our heart. ***This so called “Side-B” approach to homosexual sin is not affirmed in the statements recently approved by the EPC. So where did all this confusion come from?***

1. Both congregants and leaders within the EPC must continue to grow in holiness and in a consistently biblical witness in the world. This means you may find people within the EPC who speak and act incorrectly when it comes to issues related to same-sex attraction. This is not a sign that the denomination is slipping as much as a reminder that our ministry is necessary. May we be spurred on to the diligent use of the Word throughout our churches.
2. The committee that drafted the updates we approved went through a two-year process of writing, submitting earlier drafts, receiving feedback, and continuing to revise their work. The result is that some earlier statements needed important revisions to bring them into clear and consistent conformity to what the Scriptures teach. Much informal debate took place before the final draft was even released. The result is that opinions were formed apart from a consideration of the actual wording recommended by the committee to our denomination.
3. The committee that brought these recommendations was formed in the context of a particular church and its pastor seeking admittance into an EPC presbytery. This pastor has been at the center of significant controversy surrounding issues of sexuality, and many looked to the committee’s recommendations to do the work of barring him from ever joining our denomination. The problem is that this is entirely outside the purview of such a committee. There is no way around relying on particular sessions and presbyteries to consistently apply the constitutional standards of our denomination (EPC Book of Order, Westminster Confession of Faith, Larger and Shorter Catechisms). Where individuals, Sessions, or Presbyteries act contrary to these standards, then we respond accordingly using the means for accountability found in our Book of Discipline.

While there is much agreement in the EPC on these matters, there is at least one point of genuine disagreement: we are unified in our understanding that homosexual practice is sinful, that same-sex attraction is sinful, that for all who trust in Christ this sin is forgiven, that the Spirit works genuine heart level change with respect to this sin, and that real Christians may still continue to experience these sinful desires in this life. There is, however, legitimate disagreement on whether someone who continues to experience these

sinful desires may still be ordained as an deacon, elder, or pastor. - Some suggest that this sin struggle must be entirely absent or eradicated from someone's experience before they could ever be considered for ordination. Same-sex attraction is sufficiently grievous and represents a kind of distortion of God's creation that if someone continues to experience such sinful desires, this is inherently disqualifying. Those who hold this view tended to oppose the recent recommendations and interpreted them as a softening of our position on human sexuality.

Others are willing to consider such persons for ordination, provided there is a clear understanding of the nature of this sin and demonstrated progress, growth, and change regarding this sin struggle. Although such sinful desires and temptations may not be utterly eradicated in this life, persons may be ordained who evidence a persistent walk in Spirit-empowered repentance (as mortification and vivification) with respect to this sin, as in any other sin. This is the view set forth in the recent statements approved by the EPC.

How you can be praying:

- Pray for Sessions and Presbyteries to follow through on applying our high standards when evaluating and approving candidates for ordination.
- Pray for increasing unity in the way that the recent updates are described and characterized. Where there is agreement, may this be expressed as real agreement; where there is disagreement, may the true point of disagreement be clearly and charitably stated.
- Pray that God would continue to preserve and protect our denomination both from worldly compromise on issues of sexuality as well as a self-righteous preoccupation with the sins of others.
- Pray for the fruit of the Spirit to be powerfully evident, especially as some people and congregations may leave our denomination based on how they perceive these recent updates.
- Pray for the redeeming grace of Jesus Christ to be powerfully proclaimed and savingly at work as we continually recommit ourselves to the ministry of the gospel.

**Adapted with permission from a letter sent to the congregation of North Park, EPC in Wexford, PA by their pastor Rev. David O'Leary.*