

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Grace and peace to you, in our sovereign Lord, Jesus Christ!

We write out of love and care for those in the EPC who are curious about or troubled by our 46th General Assembly's actions concerning same-sex attraction and ordination.

Since the Assembly, some commentary has described the EPC as having "opened the door to homosexual clergy" or "approved the ordination of celibate homosexuals." We understand why that causes alarm, but we do not believe it fairly describes the question before the Assembly or the standards it approved.

We are therefore enclosing an analysis from North Park Church, a founding EPC congregation, which we think may help us cut through the advocacy and return to what the Assembly affirmed, so that we can pray, discern, and move forward together.

Although the Assembly completed its work on the Position Paper and Pastoral Letter, adopting both in June, significant work remains. The Assembly sent proposed amendments to the Book of Government to our Presbyteries as descending overtures. They must decide whether those amendments strengthen our Constitution and clarify our standards for ordained office.

The proposed amendments are best understood through two truths in our Westminster Standards that must be held together.

The first truth is that sinful desires are truly sinful. They do not become morally neutral simply because we do not act on them. The Position Paper and Pastoral Letter affirm that homosexual lust and desire are sinful. They reject embracing a homosexual identity and call Christians who experience same-sex attraction to repentance, resistance to temptation, putting sin to death, and growth in holiness (WCF 6.5; WLC 138-139).

For that reason, the standard approved by the Assembly is not mere celibacy. Outward abstinence from homosexual conduct is not enough for ordination in the EPC. The Pastoral Letter guides us to look for repentance, proven character, and the fruit of sanctification. It speaks of sinful desires that are unindulged, repented of, and put to death; temptation that is fled rather than entered into; and weakness that is mourned rather than embraced. As the Pastoral Letter says, "*Ordination is not appropriate while habitual or unresolved sexual sin persists.*"

The second truth is that remaining sin continues in believers. Sanctification is real, but it is not perfected in this life (WCF 13.1-3; WLC 78). By the power of the Holy Spirit we repent, put sin to death, grow in holiness, and experience real progress. Yet Scripture describes an ongoing conflict between the flesh and the Spirit (Gal. 5:16-17). That struggle remains until glory. We know that struggle in our own lives, as we expect you know it in yours. Praise God we are no longer slaves to sin, but slaves to righteousness, by his grace.

The Assembly sought to hold both truths together. It refused to treat homosexual desire as innocent. It also declined to say that the continuing presence of this particular sinful desire, by itself and without regard to repentance or growth in holiness, must always disqualify a Christian from ordained office.

The question at the Assembly was not whether holiness matters. The question at the Assembly was what biblical holiness looks like in candidates for office who are truly being sanctified but are not yet perfected in glory.

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The Assembly's Ad-Interim Committee on Same Sex Attraction and Ordination Standards (AIC) described sanctification as "constant warring and progressive victory against the impulses to sin, not the absence of the pressure to sin."

The Assembly has now spoken to that theological question through the Position Paper and Pastoral Letter. The question before our Presbyteries is whether the Book of Government amendments faithfully carry those convictions into our Constitution, clarify our standards for office, and strengthen our call to holiness.

To be clear, the amendments do not create a special or lesser standard for Christians who experience same-sex attraction; rather they strengthen the standards for every EPC officer. Whether single or married, officers must conform to biblical chastity and sexual purity in self-description, convictions, character, and conduct; be above reproach and Christlike; and, while recognizing that perfection awaits glory, confess and put to death remaining sin and pursue Spirit-empowered victory over sinful temptations, inclinations, and actions.

The amendments strengthen our constitutional call to holiness. They do not treat remaining sin as harmless or its continuing presence as proof that sanctification is absent. They require officers to confess and put sin to death and to show the real fruit of growth in holiness.

That distinction matters. Homosexual desire is sinful and must be put to death. But when such desire is unwanted, unindulged, repented of, and being put to death, its continuing presence does not, as a rule, mean that sanctification has failed or that person is unfaithful. "He who began the good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil 1:6). It is the constitutional responsibility of each presbytery or session to assess a candidate's life to the maturity, biblical standards and holiness required for ordination.

There is no movement within our denomination seeking to liberalize our standards of human sexuality. The EPC continues to affirm marriage between one man and one woman, chastity in singleness, the sinfulness of homosexual conduct and lust, the necessity of repentance, and the call of every Christian to holiness.

As our Presbyteries consider the amendments, we hope we will focus on the question actually before us: whether this language gives our courts clearer and stronger constitutional guidance for applying those shared biblical convictions.

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The North Park analysis says it well: "Where there is disagreement, may the true point of disagreement be clearly and charitably stated."

Let us listen to one another, search the Scriptures, test our thinking against the Westminster Standards, and speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15). Let us pray for wisdom, humility, and faithfulness, and for Christ to guard, purify, and unite his church.

May we always refuse both to diminish the seriousness of sin and to diminish the reality of Christ's sanctifying work in his people. It is God's will that we be sanctified (1 Thess. 4:3), and we pray that the God of peace himself would sanctify us completely (1 Thess. 5:23). May we hold together the truths Scripture gives us and carry out the mission Jesus Christ has entrusted to his church: to make disciples of all nations for the glory of God (Matt. 28:18-20).

In Christ,
Coram Deo!

-Dean

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