TRUE LOVING CHRISTIANS?
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"Children are dying in the streets. Wars are destroying nations and people. People around us are crying out in pain and anguish—desperate to hear a word of love—needing compassion-acceptance-grace. Where is the Church? Where are the Presbyterians? Where is our witness? We are in a box on page two trying to restrict the way people love one another" (Thomas 2). Who belongs in the church offices and who doesn't? Who can be married and who can't be? These are hot debates that have been brewing in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) for a long time, but now are finally being confronted head on. These debates are between those who feel homosexuals should be allowed to be ordained to church offices and those who feel just the opposite. They are also about those who feel homosexuals should and should not be allowed to be "united" in the church. Both sides have good arguments that make it hard to choose one side. There have been many problems that might force a
split in the Presbyterian Church because of these debates. These arguments have caused many Christians to consult the Bible to find out what it has to say on these topics. The only problem is that people interpret the Bible in many different ways. I tend to agree with those who support homosexuals in the church because I can relate best to their argument: homosexuals should have the privilege to preach and teach the Word of God, and to be “united” in the church, just as much as heterosexuals.

Presbyterian controversies about homosexuality have been in the news lately, and I know much about it because I am Presbyterian and my father is a minister. Now my father and I do not see eye to eye on these debates, but we do try to change the other’s mind. What has been the big deal in the church is the fact that an amendment was passed on April 15, 1997. The amendment, known as Amendment B, is as follows:

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 these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage of a man and a woman, 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.

Although this amendment does not come out and openly say that homosexuals may not be ordained to church offices, everyone agrees that this is what the amendment is saying. As stated in the “Fidelity and Chastity Amendment: Its Impact on Presbyterian Church,” the amendment was to serve two purposes. First, “it will make it difficult if not impossible for persons who are openly homosexual to be ordained and/or installed as officers in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)” (2). Second, “by writing this policy into the constitution of the church, this proposed amendment will make it extremely difficult for the church ever to change its mind on the question, since such a change would require a constitutional amendment” (2).

This amendment has upset many people. One of those, retired minister Hal Lloyd, wrote a letter that explained why he thought Amendment B should be thrown out. First, he pointed out that “it [Amendment B] assumes that only one interpretation of the Bible passages about homosexuality is the right one.” However, we know that certain passages are susceptible to many interpretations. Lloyd also points out that this amendment is inconsistent with other actions that the General Assembly has taken. This year and in the past, the General Assembly has insisted
that in society, homosexuals should have all the civil rights that everyone else has. However, Amendment B seems to be stating just the opposite and denies homosexuals the rights that other church members have. Paradoxically, the Presbyterian Church wants it to be known that they invite homosexuals to be a part of their congregations, but they are not to hold offices. Were I homosexual, I would be very uncomfortable knowing that I could never become a deacon or elder because of my sexual preference. I would not want to attend a church that denies me the opportunity of ever becoming an officer. Therefore, I feel that in a roundabout way, the Presbyterian Church is shunning homosexuals from its congregations. Each individual should be allowed to express her love of God and I don’t feel that someone’s sexual preference hinders the way she views God. The last point that Lloyd introduced was that Amendment B is “unloving and cruel.” Lloyd says that, “the anti-homosexual prejudices of society have inflicted cruel exclusion and persecution upon gay and lesbian people throughout history, and we who are supposed to care about people should feel their hurt and should weep with them.” As we know, Amendment B does not do this and shows no compassion for the homosexual population.

The main arguments of those who support Amendment B are the verses in the Bible that condemn homosexuality. I will be the first to admit that there are verses in the Bible which say homosexuality is a sin and should not be permitted and some of the frequently cited verses are those in the Levitical laws: “If a man has intercourse with a man as with a woman, they both commit an abomination. They shall be put to death; their blood shall be on their own heads” (Lev. 20:13). The other verse is, “You shall not lie with a man as with a woman: that is an abomination” (Lev. 18:23). However, these verses are part of Israel’s Holiness Code, which also includes commandments not to eat meat with blood in it, not to wear garments made of two kinds of yarn, not to plant fields with two kinds of seed, and not to be tattooed, as well as specific instructions on sexual matters. Seeing this, we know that these “sins” are no longer considered sins and therefore are ignored by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). So why then do some Christians say that homosexuality is a sin, if eating red meat is not? This is my argument against those who support Amendment B. We don’t seem to be consistent in our thinking and if we are to punish one sin, then we should punish all sins, not just a select few.

I would also like to bring up the fact that other, seemingly major sins have been dismissed within the church for quite some time now. There are two sins that the Bible calls such: women preaching in the church and divorce. However, we as Presbyterians have thought it proper to allow women into the church and to allow divorced people to become ministers. But in the Bible it says that we should, as Christians, not allow
these “sins” to occur. Jesus clearly states, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery” (Mark 10: 11-12). What is ironic is that we have no records of Jesus ever saying anything about homosexuality being a sin, but here He says that divorce is a sin and yet this is a practice that we permit in the church. Upon speaking about women preaching in the church, the Bible says that “women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church” (1 Cor. 14: 34-5). So I ask then, why is it that we condemn homosexuality, but not these other “sins?” I believe this is the strongest argument that those opposed to Amendment B have.

The reason so many members of the Presbyterian Church are upset is because Amendment B does not represent who we are. The Rev. Dr. William Wimberly II states in an open letter to Presbyterians that “the amendment is embarrassing to those who honor Presbyterian traditions. One of those is a tradition of fostering the reform of social values. Another is our assumption that there is only one class of church member; church officers are not ‘better’ in some morally superior way than others, for all of us are sinners equally saved by the grace of God alone and not by any goodness on our part.” I understand completely where Dr. Wimberly is coming from and, as a member of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), I hope that eventually we can have open hearts and minds about homosexuality because right now we do not all have that. If we did, we would not be struggling with the questions we are debating within the church.

Even though Amendment B has passed, I do not think that it is the end of this argument within the Presbyterian Church. I believe that if the amendment does not get reversed, some churches might be inclined to split from the denomination. I know right now there are many hurt feelings and there are some people who don’t understand how this amendment could be passed in today’s church. I still believe that homosexuals should be allowed in the church, and there seem to be many Presbyterians who feel the same way, but not enough to win the majority. It seems that we have only the choice of putting our faith in God and letting Him decide what will happen in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Works Cited

In the dark of June, 1993, the Golden Venture, a 150-foot rusting freighter, began dropping its passengers into the cold surf off Rockaway Peninsula in Queens. The trip, which had begun four months earlier in Thailand, was not supposed to end this way for the 296 Chinese who had paid up to $35,000 a piece for the promise of a safe entry into America.

The Golden Venture was scheduled for a May 17 rendezvous with a smaller ship that would ferry its passengers past immigration authorities and slip them into New York harbor. But the smaller ship never arrived, and desperate to bring their long journey to an end, the smugglers masterminding the trip decided their best alternative was to sail the Golden Venture as close to shore as possible, then release their passengers.

It was a risky decision under the best of circumstances. In the dark it turned into a disaster when the Golden Venture struck a sandbar. Ten of the ship's passengers died trying to make it to shore. Only luck and heroic rescue efforts by the police and Coast Guard saved more from drowning in the fifty-three degree Atlantic waters.

The Rockaway beach where the Golden Venture hit a sandbar was ironically just two hundred yards from Jacob Riis Park. In his 1890 book, *How the Other Half Lives*, the Danish-born Riis provided America with a