

What do the Confessions teach about sexuality? And how do they inform the ethical commitments of Presbyterian Christians?

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In Presbyterian debates over the inclusion of non-heterosexual persons it is often assumed that the *Book of Confessions* gives unequivocal support to traditionalists and thus is entirely bad news for those who want to see a more welcoming church. Many believe that the *Book of Order's* call for candidates for ordination to repent of all practices "which the confessions call sin" (G-6.0106b) effectively excludes "self-affirming, practicing homosexuals" from the church's ministry. But in fact same-sex relations are by no means at the center of the practices "which the confessions call sin." By some counts there are more than 600 such practices, including forming a visual or mental image of God or Jesus (4.097, 7.219), opposing government policy on taxation or war (5.258), and working or playing on Sunday – or causing others to do so (7.229). Amid the many words of the eleven documents of the Book of Confessions, there are very few references that can be construed as pertaining directly to same-sex relations. We can look briefly at these.

1. "Homosexual perversion"? A passage in the *Book of Confessions'* version of the Heidelberg Catechism (which was written in 1563) suggests that those guilty of "homosexual perversion" will not be saved (4.087). The problem is that this passage does not appear in the catechism as originally written. Nor does it appear in any translation other than this one, produced in 1962. In 1997, when it came to light that the original version had been tampered with, one of the translators defended inserting these words because, in light of the sexual revolution of the 1960s, "it would be well to be more specific ... than [the author] had been in his day." Edward Dowey, professor at Princeton Seminary and chair of the committee that brought this catechism to the Presbyterian General Assembly (which adopted the

From the book

Frequently Asked Questions About Sexuality, The Bible, and The Church: Plain Talk about Tough Issues

A collection of essays considering the appropriate participation of gay and lesbian Presbyterians in church life and leadership.

entire Book of Confessions in 1967) was appalled to discover, too late, that his committee had missed what he called an “illicit change.” Because the church never deliberated over the “updating,” it is unclear what force the translators’ unorthodox rendering has for Presbyterians.

2. “Sodomy”? The Westminster Larger Catechism (of 1647) lists “sodomy, and all unnatural lusts” among a great many specific sins forbidden by the seventh commandment (including “the keeping of stews,” or public baths; 7.249). In understandings of sodomy common to the 17th century, this ban would include sexual relations between two men (and possibly between two women). But it would include a good deal more than that, including any form of sexual expression (even heterosexual) that violates “nature’s aim” of procreation.

3. “One man and one woman”: The Westminster Confession defines marriage as between “one man and one woman” (6.131, 6.133) so as to exclude the possibility of polygamy (of which there are plenty of biblical examples). Its authors did not mean to address same-sex marriage (hardly conceivable in the 17th century). And yet this definition does show the way that many confessions assume

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that the Bible establishes monogamous heterosexuality as the norm for human relations. The cultures out of which the confessions were produced could not have conceived of the moral possibility of healthy, stable, committed and covenanted relationships between partners of the same sex. Is such an assumption binding in a very different context – one in which there is no longer general agreement about the “facts” that were once thought to uphold the assumption?

This is not clear. For a parallel example: The confessions’ accounts of the creation of the universe include assumptions that today could be called “creationist” (e.g., 6.022-23). But they were written well before the advent of modern biological science. Do these accounts require Presbyterians to oppose evolution?

As we can see from these few examples, when we turn to the confessions for proof-texts to support one or another position on the moral standing of same-sex relations we end up with little to show for our efforts. That is because it is only very recently that the church has seriously confronted new questions about sexual partnerships, and it is unreasonable to expect our confessions to yield direct answers to questions that did not arise in any serious way in the times for which they were written.

Perhaps, then, another approach is called for – one that asks after the larger theological convictions that guide our ethical reflection on sexuality in our time. Here are a few broad themes that pertain to our current reflections on sexuality:

1. *The limitations and necessity of confessional witness*: Presbyterians resist any slavish dependence on the prejudices of the past. Our confessions themselves subordinate their authority to that of “Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as the Scriptures bear witness to him” (9.03). They require us to look critically at all human doctrines, to continue to reflect together on the way the Holy Spirit speaks to us in scripture, and in this way to contribute to the Spirit’s work of continually reforming the church (6.010). This is one reason why we have a Book of Confessions: no single human document witnesses to God’s Word perfectly and this witness needs to be done afresh for the new challenges of new days.

2. *A guide to reading scripture*: On the basis of the confessions, Presbyterians reject narrow, literalistic readings of the Bible. They take account of history, language, and culture in interpretation; they seek to ground their reading of the Bible in the overarching story of God’s work of reconciling the world to Godself in

Christ (the rule of faith); and they work to understand scripture so as to increase the love of God and neighbor rather than diminish it (the rule of love). They recognize, also, that understanding scripture requires the illumination of the Spirit and the shared insights of a faithful community of readers.

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3. *The primacy of grace*: Presbyterians believe that we are entirely dependent on God’s grace for salvation. Therefore they reject interpretations of scripture or the human condition that serve self-righteousness, or the false confidence that we do not require God’s forgiving and reconciling work in every aspect of our life.

4. *The tendency to idolatry*: Our confessions sensitize us to a primary way in which we experience sin: our inclination to place our trust in ourselves or our condition of life or in anything else that is not God. Whenever we elevate one element of our experience – be it our race, nation, culture, gender, class, or sexual orientation – and give it ultimate loyalty or see it as the mark of special divine favor, we reject the whole claim of God on our life.

5. *The good gift of human sexuality*: Confessions written by Protestant reformers rejected the idea that human sexuality was a necessary evil. Almost all persons have a sexual urge. To encourage anyone to deny this fact or to require a celibate life was viewed as potentially disastrous. Indeed, the Larger Catechism

forbids “entangling vows of single life” (7.249). Therefore, it is best to make use of God’s gift of marriage, which should be open to as many persons as possible; and not only for the purpose of procreation and child rearing, but for the sharing of love and comfort (5.246, 7.248). Marriage is a treasured sign of God’s intention for life together (9.47). Some persons, however, may have a special gift of celibacy. But the confessions are adamant that celibacy should not be imposed on anyone as a requirement for ministry, and those who choose to be celibate should not view themselves as holier than others (5.245). Sexuality, as a good gift, calls for wise use; what we do with our bodies matters and thus all, whether married or single, sexually active or abstinent, are called to a chaste or pure life (4.108).

6. *Discipleship as the thankful glorifying of God*: Presbyterians do not seek to be saved by a moral life. Rather, the quest to live morally comes through our thankful obedience to the God who has already embraced and redeemed us. Our chief end is to glorify God in all we do. But how do we do this given the mystery of our complex desires and affections? Obviously, this requires careful discernment.

Reformed confessions treat the law, in the form of the ten commandments, as a primary means to test our progress in discipleship. The law aids us in loving God and loving neighbor. It does not cause us to ask, Do I have the right affectional and sexual orientation? But rather, Am I, through God’s grace in Christ and as enabled by the Spirit, living out through the capacities and orientations that are God’s gift to me a witness that contributes to the glory of God and that embodies God’s care for the world?

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The confessions give no final answers on matters of human sexuality. That is not their purpose. But they do provide us with historic principles of interpretation that may help Presbyterians become better attuned to the Reformed Christian witness in its breadth and diversity, and perhaps also help us speak together despite our differences.

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