

How does the struggle for full inclusion of gay and lesbian Christians relate to the civil rights movement and other struggles for freedom and equality?

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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.

Growing up in South Carolina, my male peer group and I measured our maturing into manhood on the basis of girls and sports. We often talked about our likes or dislikes for certain girls. Some boys boasted about losing their virginity. (In retrospect, it is clear that many of the stories were contrived; nonetheless, they were always fascinating.) The rest of us talked about sports. Our recent performance in high school athletics or the latest playground “juke” of an opponent served as validation for our stories.

In our own strange way we never became preoccupied with hatred of gay or lesbian people. Our uncomplimentary names for them were most often used to reassure ourselves and others that we were not gay. We did not understand much about them, but lesbian and gay people were our grade school companions. They lived next door, down the street, and around the corner from us. We knew their parents and played sports with their older brothers and dated their sisters. Therefore, the relationship waters were muddied and many connections remained in place. We simply viewed the obviously gay brother as different. I did not realize at the time that this was the beginning of subtle categorization and intense alienation that would accompany these childhood friends for the remainder of their lives in this society.

The Gospel of John’s account of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11) describes relationships of power that are reminiscent of the power structures in our own society. Forget for a moment that this woman is an adulteress. I ask you to forget, because it is obvious that the men who bring her to Jesus and raise the question regarding the right to stone her based on the Law of Moses have forgotten. If sin was the major issue, some man or men caught in the act with her would

also be facing capital punishment. However, the text represents a male-dominated, hierarchical context in which men are exempt from the death sentence based on the power structure of their culture. Categorized as an adulteress and alienated from power, this woman's sin is now to be punished by a march to death. The emerging religious leader's approval is now needed as a cursory nod to the established powers before the crowd performs the execution. Wait! Jesus writes on the ground. Did he write the names of the accusers who had been with this woman? If so, was it the son of one of the Pharisees who had not sown all of his wild oats? Or was this woman the unacknowledged daughter of one of the men in the crowd? Although we will never know what Jesus wrote on the ground that day, we do know that the men dropped their rocks and went home when confronted with their own sinfulness. Jesus' writing changed the way power was construed (?) in that particular situation.

As we discuss ordaining lesbian and gay Christians, it is important that we too remember power as a central issue. Although traditional interpretations of the story of the woman caught in adultery focus on sin and Jesus' openness to grace,

both power and gender construction are also central issues.

Just so, the question of whether or not to ordain gay and lesbian Christians is not just a question about what counts as sin or grace. It is also a question about power. And so it is related to other struggles for freedom, equality, and full participation.

Male domination is also at issue, because the participation of the man in an adulterous relationship is overlooked. Just so, the question of whether or not to ordain gay and lesbian Christians is not just a question about what counts as sin or grace. It is also a question about power. And so it is related to other struggles for freedom, equality, and full participation.

We have to remember that slavery and the refusal to ordain women were both defended on biblical and theological grounds. But I shudder to think what the Presbyterian Church (USA) would have become had we not fought for women to be ordained fifty years ago. Or, what would have happened to our denomination if the leadership of the

Presbyterian Church in the United States had not taken a stand on principle to move the 1965 General Assembly meeting from Memphis, Tennessee to Montreat, North Carolina? The meeting was moved because the session of the local church (Second Presbyterian) that was to host the General Assembly prohibited African Americans from being admitted to worship. We have shown at least some ability to name the power issues at work in biblical and theological conversations. And we need to do the same thing now.

The Church of Jesus Christ has participated in gender and race domination and exclusion throughout history. Therefore, we must view the biblical record and our interpretation as to who is in and out with both theology and history in mind. Theology presses our faith perspectives to higher and better hopes. But history reminds us of our frailty in accepting God's expectation for an inclusive Christian community based on love for all humanity. We must examine how our interpretations of scripture have led to the acceptance of some and the alienation of others. We need to study who gains from exclusion. We need to ask who desires power and who is genuinely seeking righteousness. We need to trace the ways that questions of sin hide questions of power.

Jesus repeatedly rejects human attempts to exclude people who get labeled as "sinful." Blind Bartimaeus receiving his sight (Mk. 10: 46-52) is another example of grace pressing against the edges of society's power arrangements. While the established host guides Jesus through the polished main streets, an inappropriate beggar cries out for healing, disrupting the hospitality committee's tour. The crowd rebukes him, but Jesus confronts the established theology that legitimates

the blind man's segregation and exclusion. Jesus heals him. In so doing, Jesus raises a community's awareness of redemption by lifting the veil of historical domination of the poor and proclaiming a new ethic of restorative justice. He reaches beyond the boundaries of the established order to redeem Bartimaeus and forces the community to view Jesus, Bartimaeus and itself differently. As an old parishioner told me a few years ago, "When you really see Jesus, you cannot see yourself or the world the same anymore." Presbyterians

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must bring Jesus into our present arrangements of power constructed by white males so that we may unbind ourselves from the categorization, alienation, and separation that has caused centuries of pain.

Oftentimes we struggle with the word "power" in the church. We like to pretend that there is no exercise of power in the household of God. But power is a reality that exists even in the church. And lesbian and gay Christians have discovered the real obstacles that power poses to their broader participation in the Church. They are not the first to do so, and they will not be the last.

Lesbian and gay activists sometimes compare their struggle to the struggles for women's suffrage and racial desegregation against a prevailing power structure. But many persons who fought in older movements for freedom and

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equality find it difficult to see the correlation between these struggles. It can be difficult to see the connections for at least three reasons.

First, none of these movements has been built on a consciousness of the intersections of various kinds of oppression. Many African-American women would argue that the civil rights movement and its leaders were sexist and chauvinist. Similarly, women's suffrage was concerned with women and their rights as human beings and not translated to the larger society as a movement that also included lesbian women. Our movements have focused on one use of power or another, sometimes to the neglect of the "intersectional" nature of exclusion.

Second, many persons in older civil rights movements do not believe in extending the rights of gay and lesbian persons. As Gayraud Wilmore has aptly stated in his article for this booklet, African Americans have not understood the lesbian and gay struggle for inclusion in Christendom in the same vein as the civil rights movement. Although we African-Americans live in the contradictions in church life by hiring church personnel and ordaining clergy and officers who are lesbian and gay persons, our theology remains stagnant with regards to full public

acceptance. But why should this be? We can support a movement against exclusive power structures even if we do not think it is exactly like our own struggle as African-Americans.

Finally, it is difficult to connect the struggles because each movement has a tendency to slip into the "empire thinking" that has been born out of Western theological construct of oppression. Simply put, the empire mind believes that someone has to be left out so that the powerful may prosper. The imperial mindset leads excluded groups to compete with one another, as if full acceptance of gay and lesbian people would come at the cost of real equality for African-American Christians. But the imperial mindset serves only the empire. The truth is that we're all in this struggle together.

People involved in every struggle for freedom and equality should ask questions about the power relations at stake in this debate. Is this issue really about sin – or is it centered on maintaining the "good ole boys" club through conservative control of the denomination? Can liberal ideals of inclusion be accomplished through passive-aggressive strategizing? Will moderate waffling raise effective ways of declaring Jesus' real desires for the Church, or simply appease both sides with watered-down rhetoric in the name of Church unity?

What do opponents to lesbian and gay ordination have to gain? And in what ways can proponents of lesbian and gay ordination use their power so that it is effective for the gospel and promotion of the Church? How can we make stronger connections – practically, politically, and theologically – between these movements for equality and inclusion?

In retrospect I know that my friends and I teased and demeaned the gay boys we grew up with because we needed to affirm our own superiority. Sports and girls were simply mechanisms by which we affirmed our maleness as it had been defined by our culture, society and rearing. It was a poor choice and I was wrong! Women were also degraded in our boyish conversations. Even when I did not participate, I stood by and quietly or laughingly approved “kiss and tell” stories or demeaning characterizations. Growing older has allowed me to both experience and witness the ways that cultural power constructs have damaged and scarred the souls of human beings through labeling, categorizing and defaming. I have committed myself not to participate in power mongering that debilitates the possibilities for a community that embraces all of God’s children. Judgment can be harsh in this world we live in. And it can be a tool for the already powerful against the already powerless. I believe that is why judgment and exclusion remain God’s business. Participating in the building of the Kingdom of God with all the weaknesses, frailties and human faults that all of us possess is the business God assigned to me. And that is difficult enough. I believe I will leave the business that belongs to God in God’s hands. Jesus had the formula correct. The wheat and the weeds are to be separated at the harvest. And it is not harvest time yet!