Why, If We Share the Same Bible, Do Presbyterians Differ So Widely on the Issue of Gay Ordination? Section 3

By Mark D. Roberts | Wednesday, July 30, 2008

Part 11 of series: *The End of the Presbyterian Church USA? Revisited*

I closed yesterday's post by suggesting two reasons why many Presbyterians no longer regard the whole of Scripture as authoritative. These were:

1. The fact that this view is held by many seminary professors in PCUSA seminaries.

2. The fact that some passages in the Bible are troubling has led many to reject their authority.

Today I'll suggest two more reasons.

Third, the rejection of the full authority of the Bible reflects our postmodern and relativistic culture. In general, people today don't accept established traditions and authorities. They claim the right to pick and choose what to believe and obey, especially in matters of religion. People who affirm the full authority of Scripture and who live in obedience to Scripture are a counter-cultural minority.

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, many Presbyterians have come to know faithful Christians who are gay and lesbian, people who have truly confessed Jesus as Savior and Lord. Often they have tried to live by biblical teaching about sexuality, but have found this burden to be unbearable. In the end, they have come to believe that their homosexual orientation is not a result of the fallenness of the world, but rather a gift from God. They believe that God blesses their same-sex intimacy just as he does heterosexual intimacy. And some of these people also believe that they are called by God into ministry, and they deeply desire to be ordained. Many good-hearted Presbyterians, paying close attention to the experiences of gay and lesbian believers, and feeling empathy for them in their painful struggle for denominational approval, have chosen to give more authority to the experience and feelings of gay and lesbian Christians than to Scripture. For these Presbyterians, if Scripture teaches that homosexual behavior is always wrong, then Scripture itself simply has to be wrong in this teaching.

I can understand why some of my Presbyterian brothers and sisters have gone this direction. Throughout my life and ministry, I have had several close personal or pastoral relationships with gay and lesbian Christians. As I have walked with them on the tortuous road of their discipleship, I have wished that I could simply bless their homosexual feelings and behavior. No matter how hard I've tried to be kind and compassionate, I haven't been able to tell folks what they have wanted to hear from me. Usually, this has led to brokenness in our relationships, as people have felt personally misunderstood and judged by me. I must confess that if I had only a tad less confidence in the inspiration and authority of the whole Bible, I'd be on the other side of this issue. But my convictions about biblical authority and interpretation, combined with my conclusions about what the Bible actually teaches, leave me no choice but to conclude that homosexual activity is not okay in

any situation. I am not able to say, “Well, I guess Paul was wrong here,” even though his teaching contradicts the experiences of well-intentioned Christians I have known.

Because so many proponents of gay ordination do not affirm the full authority of Scripture, arguments by opponents that continually point to biblical texts have fallen on deaf ears. A substantial number of Presbyterians today simply don’t care what Romans 1 actually teaches about the morality of homosexual activity. Similarly, claims by proponents that depend primarily on the experiences gay and lesbian people and not on Scripture have little impact on opponents. We are simply talking past each other because we no longer share a common understanding of how God makes his will known to us.

Thus, every time Presbyterians form groups of people with diverse views on the gay ordination issue, charging these groups to understand and to love each other, hoping that such a process might lead to some sort of compromise on the ordination issue, the results are the same. People with diverse perspectives do come to understand and love each other. They often develop close relationships in the context of mutual respect. Yet they almost never change their minds on the matter of gay ordination. No compromise is produced. No matter what the Bible says, those who favored gay ordination going in continue to favor it. And no matter how many testimonies by gay and lesbian people are heard, those who opposed their ordination going in continue to oppose it going out. In the end, both sides do their favoring and opposing with more love and mutual respect, which is surely a good thing. But it fails to resolve our denominational impasse. The idea that we can somehow sit down and come up with a loving compromise about this issue, one that maintains our denominational unity in practice, is naïve and unsupported by years of valiant efforts.