

Holy Conversations

I. Opening Remarks.

First of all I want to thank everyone for participating in this “Holy Conversation.” I am honored to share this opportunity with my brother, Ernie Thompson. I am humbled to have been asked to participate in this private conversation carried out in a very public forum. I believe that God called me to be a part of this, and I pray that Ernie’s words and mine will be inspired and directed by the Holy Spirit.

Second, I spent many hours praying and studying many books written by people of reputation on the various sides of this issue. Despite my study, meditation, and prayer I was not at all sure what I would present to you. Then during my meditations and prayers God caused me to take a step back and reassess what I was trying to do. I realized that what I was seeking to do was present a version of the various authors’ positions which I had read. God led me to understand that what I needed to do was present my understanding of what I believed and why. I am not saying that what I believe is the right way or the only way. What I am saying is that what I am expressing to you is what I believe and some of the Scriptures that informs my belief. Yet, there is one overarching principle, command if you will, that I believe is paramount in all of this: Loving God and loving our neighbor. Remember Jesus instructs when asked, **“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And Jesus said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’**

On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:36-40).¹

Having said this it is my hope and I believe Ernie’s hope as well that you will listen to us with open hearts and spirits as we engage in this risky but necessary and healthy conversation.

II. What I Believe

A. I believe that the traditional understanding of marriage, between a man and a woman, is a gift from God. It is a building block for a healthy society when that marriage is built upon the foundation of Jesus Christ. Marriages are intended to last and endure through difficulties and hardships as well as through times of joy and ease.

1. In Genesis we read as part of the creation narrative:

Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable [corresponding to] him.’ (...) And the Lord God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. And the man said, ‘This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.’ For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.”
(Genesis 2:18-24).

In this passage it can be understood that God is making for the man a partner that will complete or compliment the man in ways that male relationships are unable to complete or compliment him. Moreover, same gender relationships do not provide for the procreation of humanity.

¹ All Scripture references used in this document are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB) copyright 1977. The Lockman Foundation, La Habra, California.

2. In the Gospel according to Mark we read that Jesus references this passage of Scripture while giving instruction concerning divorce. Jesus asserts, **“Because of the hardness of your heart he [Moses] wrote you this commandment [on divorce]. But from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and the two shall become one flesh; consequently they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together; let no man separate”** (Mark 10:6-9).

In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus is questioned by some Pharisees after He gave instruction on forgiveness. Then we read:

Some Pharisees came to Him, testing Him, and saying, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause at all?” And Jesus answered and said, “Have you not read, that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh?” Consequently they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate (Matthew 19:3-6).

In both Mark and Matthew Jesus instruction on marriage is connected with divorce and the “hardness of your hearts” or the rebellion against God’s directives. In Matthew we have the added context of a lengthy instruction concerning forgiveness. And in each Scripture Jesus makes it clear that God’s intention was that a man and a woman live together as a compliment to each other.

3. I think the Scripture text, at least for me, which is at the heart of the issue for today is Romans 1:18-32.

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For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.

Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.

And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.

Paul in this passage of Scripture is showing us what happens when people exchange the genuine for a substitute or counterfeit. Paul begins by expressing how people have exchanged the glory of God for idols. Paul continues and explains that people have also exchanged God's truth of right and wrong for Satan's lies and relativism. Further, Paul expresses the way in which men and women exchange the natural functioning of human relationships for that which is in opposition to that which God intended. The result is that God allows people to languish in their rebellion.

This passage of Scripture also explains that there are earthly consequences for sin. The bottom line root cause of sin as expressed in this passage and elsewhere in Scripture is rebellion

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against God. When people choose to believe Satan's lies over God's truth sin is always going to be the result.

This is no different than what happened to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Recall, that Adam received from God the command to not eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil that was located in the center of the Garden. **"Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him'"** (Genesis 2:18). After this Eve is created to be the suitable or corresponding partner for Adam. Then we read about the introduction of sin into the created order.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, "Indeed, has God said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden?'" And the woman said to the serpent, "From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat from it or touch it, lest you die.'" And the serpent said to the woman, "You surely shall not die!" "For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate. (Genesis 3:1-6).

In the same way as Paul describes for us in Romans 1:18-32 how people have exchanged God's truth for Satan's lie so too did Adam and Eve choose to believe Satan's lie and there were earthly and eternal consequences.

Remember the attitudes and behaviors associated with homosexuality are but one of the stated consequences for not believing God. We must remember that any sin carries with it consequences both here in this life and in the life to come.

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Paul concludes Romans 1:18-32 with the admonition that those who rebelled against God knew God's ordinances and chose to not only rebel against God but to also give "Hearty approval to those who practice them [those things wherein the genuine is exchanged for a counterfeit]" (Romans 1:32).

4. I believe in the immutability of God. That is I affirm that God's nature remains unchanged. What changes is us as we are influenced by culture, economic situation, and numerous other societal factors all of which become the filter through which we view and understand the Triune God and Scripture. The Psalmist declares, **Thou art the same, and Thy years will not come to an end**" (Psalm 102:27).

5. I believe Jesus is God incarnate and as such is the embodiment of the nature of God. The author of Hebrews instructs, **"And He [Jesus] is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His [God's] nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power"** (Hebrews 1:3). Furthermore we read, **"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, yes and forever"** (Hebrews 13:8).

B. I Am not Convinced.

1. Even though there is no specific prohibition against same gender marriage there are several Scriptures that indicate that homosexual practice is sinful. Among them are the aforementioned passage of Romans 1:18-32, as well as Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, 1st Corinthians 6:9-11, and 1st Timothy 1:8-11.

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2. I am also not convinced because I think we far too often underestimate the power of sin and how deeply and completely sin has corrupted the human condition. After Adam and Eve sinned every man and woman was born corrupted by sin. According to Scripture we are conceived in sin (Psalm 51:5). How completely does sin effect and affect the image of God within us? When Adam and Eve rebelled against God their innocence was lost. What else was lost?

3. Moreover, I am not convinced that same gender marriage is appropriate because we underestimate the effectiveness of the “Great Deceiver,” Satan. Remember, he is the father of lies and will stop at nothing to compromise, undermine, and diminish Jesus’ disciples’ witness to the world. In Colossians 2:8 we cautioned, **“That no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ”** (Colossians 2:8).

The following quote, which is attributed to Irenaeus of Lyons, rightly asserts, “Error never shows itself in its naked reality, in order not to be discovered. On the contrary, it dresses elegantly, so that the unwary may be led to believe that it is more truthful than truth itself.”

III. I Am a Sinner.

I am also a man who believes in a sovereign and holy God who loves me so much that He gave His Son, Jesus as the perfect sacrifice to atone for my sin so that I could be with God forever.

1. Sin is a common problem for all of us.

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a. God speaking to Cain after he and Abel presented their sacrifices to the Lord, asked and challenged, **“Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it”** (Genesis 4:6-7).

b. Paul reminds us of the pernicious nature of sin when quoting from the Hebrew Scriptures declares, **“There is none righteous not even one; There is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God (....)”** Paul then continues as he writes, **“for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God”** (Romans 3:10-23).

c. Our adversary’s primary target is the Church-The Body of Christ. This means that the devil will stop at nothing to compromise the power of a unified testimony and witness to the transforming power of a relationship with Jesus Christ. When the Church falls into dis-unity then our witness to the world is compromised.

d. Sometimes it seems to me that we are trying to redefine sin in order to accommodate or justify our sinful behavior and attitudes. In this way we are not unlike the expert in the Law seeking to justify himself who asked Jesus, **“Who then is my neighbor?”** (Luke 10:29).

e. Often we are more like the Pharisee who while praying declared, **“God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer”**. Instead we should be more like the tax-gatherer who prayed while, **“Beating his breast, saying, ‘God be merciful to me, the sinner!’”** (Luke 18:9-14). We love to point out

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how one person's sin is greater than our own in order to justify our bad behavior. We must recognize that sin is sin and none of us are better than anyone else before God.

f. James speaking against the sin of partiality cautions, **"If you show partiality you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all. (...) For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment"** (James 2:9-13).

g. We would all do well to take heed to Peter's admonition to the Church, **"Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour"** (1 Peter 5:8).

2. Jesus is the only way of salvation.

a. I need a Savior because I am a sinner. Living a good life is insufficient to secure my salvation and entry into heaven. No matter how many good things I do I will always come up short. In Revelation 20:11-15 we read of the judgment that takes place before the throne of God. According to this passage scrolls or books are opened. In the one set are the records of peoples' deeds which they accomplished throughout their lives. In the second set are those names written in the Lamb's book of life. This passage concludes declaring, **"And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire"** (Revelation 20:15).

b. In Ephesians Paul instructs, **"For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one**

should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:8-10).

c. The short of it is that you, me, and everyone are sinners and we need someone to intercede for us before God. **“Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life; no one is able to come to the Father except through Him”** (John 14:6). This is a very exclusive statement, yet the call to salvation is universal. This we must remember: no one’s sin is greater than any other’s sin; neither is anyone’s sin any less than any other’s sin.

C. I am a sojourner. God has set before me a path upon which to walk. As I sojourn through this life my purpose is to use the various gifts and talents which God entrusts to my care to glorify God, to introduce His Son Jesus to all that I encounter along the way, and to build up the Body of Christ through the appropriate use of that which God entrusts to my care.

1. Scripture makes clear that those who follow Jesus have their citizenship in heaven (see Philippians 3:20).

2. Moreover, Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac were all looking to the Promised Land, not an earthly one, but one of heavenly origin. The author of Hebrews is clear about this when writing:

All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. And indeed if they had been thinking [remembering] of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is a heavenly

one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them (Hebrews 11:13-16).

3. As I pass through this land on my way to where I believe I will spend eternity, which is God's heavenly kingdom, I am convinced that as I respond to God in gratitude for extending His grace to me, that I must also be a person of grace. This means that I recognize that my sin is always before me and against God.

4. I understand that I am not to judge another in critical, demeaning, and unhealthy ways. Jesus admonishes His disciples, both then and now:

Do not judge lest you be judged. For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you. And why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye (Matthew 7:1-5).

When I remember to live after the example of Jesus I become very aware of my own sin and therefore less likely to place myself in a position to judge the merits of another's actions.

5. However, I am not released or absolved from the responsibility to proclaim God's Good News of Jesus. In fact the more aware I become of my own sin the more aware I become of the great need to share the Good News of Jesus at every opportunity. If I say that I love my neighbor as myself and yet fail to share with them the transforming Gospel message of Jesus, have I really loved my neighbor at all? (Jones, 21).

IV. What is My Purpose?

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A. I am not here to advocate either “for” or “against” any particular amendment to the Constitution of the PC (USA). The time for debate of the various proposals will be at the upcoming Presbytery meeting.

B. I am here to listen. As part of this “Holy Conversation” I have stated my belief in the traditional understanding of marriage. I will listen with an open heart and spirit to a differing opinion advocating same gender marriage.

C. I am here to advocate for and further the peace, unity, and purity of the Church. I do this in faithful obedience to God as I live in as much of a Christ-like way as I am able, with God’s help, in keeping with my ordination vows.

D. I am here because God calls me to be salt and light within the context of the Reformed Tradition and specifically within the PC (USA). There was a time in the not too distant past when I adamantly and defiantly asserted that on the day that our denomination affirmed same gender marriage as a viable form of marriage that I would leave this denomination.

God had a different plan. Through much of the last fifteen years God was steadily working on me. God expressed to me in many ways that I was precisely where He wanted me to be; perhaps for just such a time as this.

The question that went through my mind was, “How can I be the witness that God has called me to be if I leave and go somewhere else?” The answer is that I cannot. What I am saying is that a part of my purpose for being here is to call all of us to understand a few basic items.

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1. The very wording of the proposed amendment acknowledges that we will agree to disagree about marriage. There are those, such as myself, who will affirm the traditional view that marriage is between one man and one woman. The amendment also allows for those who affirm that two people committed to each other regardless of gender should be allowed to enjoy the blessings of marriage.

2. Currently in our state same gender marriage is legal. The proposed amendment does not mandate that any Teaching elder or Church participate in any marriage ceremony in which they believe it is inappropriate. No one can persuade or coerce anyone to act in a manner contrary to what they believe to be true.

3. When people leave our denomination in favor of other denominations that they believe will not have to confront this issue they deceive themselves. Every church regardless of affiliation will have to come to some form of understanding as to what will or will not be allowed. Why not stay and enjoin the conversation now. After all is this not a part of what it is to be Reformed-to seek the will of God as a gathered community guided by the Holy Spirit?

4. I acknowledge that there are points of theology and practice that Ernie and I do not agree upon. The issue of same gender marriage is only one. There may be others. Nevertheless, I am committed to finding ways to work with Ernie and all those who disagree with me in furthering the peace, unity, and purity of the Church. When we do this we will be better able to help accomplish Christ's mission.

5. Satan is hard at work seeking to undermine the unified witness of Jesus' Church. The devil does this most effectively by attacking the community of believers by sowing seeds of

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mistrust, division, and unhealthy complaint. Imagine, if you will, how powerful the witness of a unified Presbytery of Coastal Carolina can be when we start putting our tremendous assets and resources towards meaningful missional endeavors in our communities, in our state, and throughout the world.

V. Recapitulation.

Regardless of where you stand on the proposed amendment I encourage you to continue to further the peace, unity, and purity of Christ's Church. Prayerfully study Scripture. Listen with an open heart, and spirit. Yet, understand that you are also in need of God's grace.

Living an authentic Christian life often times will put us at odds with what are perceived to be the prevailing cultural norms. Paul encourages, **“By the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect”** (Romans 12:1-2). There are times when Christians must take a stand for what they believe to be true regarding, God, Jesus, and the place of the Church in the world. We may never agree on many important points of theology. It is my hope that we can agree that Jesus is the only way of salvation and from that place of agreement continue to work together in Christ's mission to the world.

I also want us to remember that we come from a long history and tradition of seeking ways to remain relevant within our particular contexts. Our history and tradition is known as “Reformed.” We “Reformers” love to say that “We are a Church reformed and always

reforming.” Yet, we very often leave out the part that comes next, “According to the Word of God.” Let us seek reformation, but only according to the Word of God.

Let me be clear; **I am unequivocally in support of traditional marriage; a committed relationship between a man and a woman.** I believe that marriage is a gift from God and that it is for the ordering of society and the overall well being of humanity. When God created woman out of man God created a partner that was supporting, affirming, and complimentary to man. Remember that Jesus affirms as recorded in Mark’s Gospel account when a man and a woman are joined together in marriage, **“They are no longer two, but one flesh”** (Mark 10:8).

VI. References.

A. Scripture.

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|---------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Genesis 2:18-24. | 9. Colossians 2:8. | 17. John 17:1-26 |
| 2. Mark 10:6-9. | 10. Genesis 4:6-7. | 18. Romans 1:18-32. |
| 3. Matthew 19:3-6. | 11. Ephesians 2:8-10. | 19. 1 Peter 5:8. |
| 4. Romans 1:18-32. | 12. John 14:6. | 20. Revelation 20:15. |
| 5. Luke 10:25-37. | 13. Hebrews 11:13-16. | 21. Romans 3:10-23. |
| 6. Genesis 3:1-6 | 14. Matthew 7:1-5. | 22. Luke 18:9-14. |
| 7. Psalm 102:27. | 15. Hebrews 1:3. | 23. Hebrews 13:8. |
| 8. James 2:9-13. | 16. Romans 12:1-2. | 24. Matthew 22:36-40. |

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