

# General Assembly 2014:

## Recap and Implications of the Same-Gender Marriage Debate

1 Corinthians 14:26, 37-40  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman  
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Marj Carpenter, the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) back in 1995, was known for her often-repeated declaration, "I am sinfully proud to be a Presbyterian." I have long echoed her sentiments, primarily because of how we govern ourselves as a denomination. We indeed model what it means to be a connectional community. So yes, that means we argue and fight just like any other family.

Presbyterians gather in groups elected by their congregations or presbyteries and entrust them to follow their conscience as guided by the Holy Spirit. So when decisions are made, whether we like them or not – and believe me, there have been lots of decisions made over the years in which I have vehemently disagreed – we accept them and vow to live together in mutual forbearance. Then, if need be, we work through the system if we want those decisions changed.

As it just so happens, a majority of the decisions made at this year's national gathering of our General Assembly (which met this past week in Detroit) have made many of us very happy. You can be assured, however, that if we are happy, then there are many who are deeply unhappy, hurt, and even angry. We know what it feels like to be in that position, don't we. Therefore, even in the midst of our celebration, we must not gloat. In fact, **we should all be in prayer for those who are grieving the decisions that have been made by this year's Assembly. I truly feel for those Presbyterian pastors throughout the country who are facing angry and hurt congregations this morning. I've been in that position myself over the years.**

With all that as a preface, let's take a look now at some of the Assembly's decisions and their implications. On Thursday afternoon, thanks to the miracle of modern communications, I was able to sit in my study here at the church and watch a live stream of the debate – as it occurred – concerning matters addressed by the Civil Union and Marriage Issues Committee.

As is typical when discussing controversial issues, a lot of time was spent at the beginning of the debate in parliamentary maneuvers (I'd classify them more as shenanigans, even though they are legal according to *Robert's Rules of Order*). There were attempts to keep the actual debate from even taking place. Generally, most Presbyterians, including myself, are huge fans of *Robert's Rules of Order*. You may have heard one of the mantras often repeated in our denomination, "Do all things decently and in order." You may not have known, however, that that phrase comes directly out of the first letter from the apostle Paul to the church in Corinth. As Paul tries to explain

the finer points of worship gatherings, he ends with, **“but all things should be done decently and in order.”** Presbyterians, even progressive ones, have taken this passage of scripture quite literally.

The first item of business from the **Civil Union and Marriage Issues Committee** was whether or not to create a task force to identify common ground and reconcilable differences with respect to **same-gender marriage**. (I will use that term since that is what was used at the Assembly, but what we’re really talking about is **marriage equality**.)

The proponents of this overture wanted to study the issue for four more years. In other words, postpone making any decision. Even though this was amended to a reduced two-year study, this proposal failed with 68% of the nearly 600 commissioners voting in opposition. The interpretation of that decision is that we don’t need additional study. After all, the General Assembly prepared and sent out to the entire church a marriage study just last year. We examined that study thoroughly here at College Hill. My guess is that a vast majority of those who think they already know all they need to know about Christian marriage in our denomination didn’t even bother to look at that study. Given that, the Assembly basically said they were ready to make a decision now to support same-gender marriage or not.

**Many of us, for decades, have considered our denomination’s overall policy toward the LGBT community to be the last officially sanctioned prejudice within Christianity. This General Assembly will go down in history, then, for helping break down the walls of that church-sanctioned prejudice!** They did this through the approval of the next two items of business. And yes, they are indeed controversial.

By 61%, **the Assembly approved an Authoritative Interpretation of our church constitution that removed the ban on pastors who live in states that allow civil same-gender marriages to perform those marriages**. The permission to allow them to do so goes into effect **immediately**, for an Authoritative Interpretation is binding without needing to be voted on by the presbyteries throughout the country. There was an added provision, rightly in my opinion, that allows pastors and individual congregations the right to exercise their freedom of conscience in *not* officiating at or using their church building for same-gender marriages if they choose not to do so. In other words, **pastors will not be mandated to officiate at same-gender marriages if they feel it is in violation of their own conscience. I would want that same freedom of conscience.**

The implications of this Authoritative Interpretation cannot be understated or underestimated. First of all, **the Assembly recognized that we have been in the midst of a pastoral crisis by forbidding ministers to pastor their church members as they see fit**, including marriage ceremonies for all in their congregations. However, the opposition had a good point when they claimed that **the Assembly would put the denomination in a constitutional crisis if approved**. Let me explain.

Since the term ‘marriage’ in our denomination is currently defined as “between a man and a woman,” we would indeed be at odds with that definition in allowing pastors to officiate at a marriage ceremony between two people of the same gender. So it is true, the Assembly *did* place the denomination in violation of our own church constitution as it currently stands. Yet, **the Assembly determined that the pastoral crisis took precedence over the constitutional crisis**. To my knowledge, that may be a first in our denomination’s long history.

During the debate on the Authoritative Interpretation, the **Rev. Dr. Jim Miller**, pastor of First Presbyterian Church here in Tulsa and one of our presbytery’s four

commissioners, spoke strongly in opposition. He expressed the concern that **the fragile unity of the church is at stake. I tend to agree.** While acknowledging he has a right to his own opinion, he went on to say something with which I strongly disagree. **He called the Authoritative Interpretation “a cynical manipulation of political expediency.” Dr. Miller is hurting. And while I don’t agree with him, I hurt with him.**

In order to resolve that constitutional conflict, the Assembly next took up a proposed amendment to change our church constitution’s definition of marriage. I won’t go into all the details, but basically, the Assembly approved an amendment that would **revise the definition of marriage as “between a man and a woman,” to “between two people, traditionally a man and a woman.”** As with any Assembly action that would officially change our *Book of Order*, the amendment now goes for a vote to all 173 of our regional presbyteries throughout the country. Each presbytery has up to one year to vote. **A simple majority of 51% of all the presbyteries is required for adoption. That’s 88 presbyteries.**

Watching the debate on this issue as it took place on the floor of the General Assembly was both fascinating and a bit surprising. Surprising because the debate didn’t last very long. It became clear early on that the Assembly was growing tired of hearing basically the same arguments over and over again by each of the commissioners that came to a microphone to speak. So without too many fireworks the Assembly voted. The vote was 429 in favor, 175 opposed to amending our definition of marriage in the Presbyterian Church. That was **a resounding 71% to 29%.**

But going back to that current constitutional crisis, we are indeed in violation of our *Book of Order* until the proposed amendment is passed in the coming year. But again, that was a crisis the Assembly was willing to allow. For **the time had finally come to make a profound, decisive and wide-reaching change to our church policy concerning our gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender members.** Heath Rada, the Moderator of this 221<sup>st</sup> General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA), declared after the vote, "We are saying as a denomination that we affirm committed relationships between two people that love each other. That is the basis, in the context of a relationship with God."

**For those same-gender couples in this congregation, who already believe that God does affirm and bless your relationship, it is no small matter that the official policy of the entire denomination now also affirms and blesses your relationship.**

I don’t think that anyone has much doubt that at this point in the life and history of our denomination that the change will be approved by a majority of our presbyteries – perhaps even here in Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery.

I want to share with you, now, a few comments that came after the Assembly concluded its business. Do you want the good news first, or the bad news? [Bad] Okay, let’s start with the bad news so we can end on a high note.

Many of you are familiar with an organization called The Presbyterian Lay Committee. They put out a publication entitled ***The Layman***. To say that it is ultra-conservative would be an understatement. This is their press release in response to the Assembly’s action:

The Presbyterian Lay Committee mourns these actions and calls on all Presbyterians to resist and protest them. You should tell your pastor and the members of your session that you disapprove of these actions. You should refuse to fund the General Assembly, your synod, your presbytery

and even your local church if those bodies have not explicitly and publicly repudiated these unbiblical actions.

God will not be mocked and those who substitute their own felt desires for God's unchangeable Truth will not be found guiltless before a holy God.

Obviously, living together in unity is not a priority for the folks associated with The Presbyterian Lay Committee.

At a press conference following the votes, **General Assembly Moderator Heath Rada said he expects to spend much of his time during the coming year seeking to reconcile Presbyterians who disagree on same-gender marriage.** As an experienced mediator, Rada said he hopes to use those skills to hold the church together.

The conversations about human sexuality began in 1978 when that Assembly passed an authoritative interpretation – that did not go out to the presbyteries for a vote – that declared “homosexuality does not accord with God's plan for humanity.”

Our current General Assembly Stated Clerk Gradye Parsons acknowledged the historic decisions made by the Assembly. He stated, “There have been places along the way when our talk turned to action, and this is one of those days.” He added, “both the church and the society have changed – more people are getting to know gays and lesbians, laws are changing and pastoral situations are changing.”

I realize that my sermon time has passed for this morning, and I haven't even mentioned a number of other controversial decisions made by our General Assembly this past week. But I have included an insert in your worship bulletin some concise information from the *Presbyterian Outlook* that will walk you through all the Assembly's major decisions. I invite you to contact me with any questions or concerns.

While there are many who decry the decisions made by this Assembly, most of us gathered here this morning can declare that we are sinfully proud today to be a Presbyterian!

**Let us give thanks for the goodness and inclusive love and grace of God, and for the Presbyterian Church (USA)'s long-awaited decision to extend that love and grace and inclusion to *all* people. All are now indeed welcome!**

Amen.

The full text of the authoritative interpretation (of W-4.9000) of the Book of Order:

“Worship is a central element of the pastoral care of the people of God (W-6.3001, W-6.3010) in which a teaching elder's discernment of the leading of the Holy Spirit is indispensable. The necessity of ensuring the exercise of freedom of conscience in the interpretation of Scripture (G-2.0105) in the planning and leadership of worship has deep roots in our Reformed tradition and theology. Because a service of marriage is one form of such worship, when a couple requests the involvement of the church in solemnizing their marriage as permitted by the laws of the civil jurisdiction in which the marriage is to take place, teaching elders have the pastoral responsibility to assess the capabilities, intentions, and readiness of the couple to be married (W-4.9002), and the freedom of conscience in the interpretation of Scripture (G-2.0105) to participate in any such marriage they believe the Holy Spirit calls them to perform.

“Exercising such discretion and freedom of conscience under the prayerful guidance of Scripture, teaching elders may conduct a marriage service for any such couple in the place where the community gathers for worship, so long as it is approved by the session; or in such other place as may be suitable for a service of Christian worship. In no case shall any teaching elder's conscience be bound to conduct any marriage service for any couple except by his or her understanding of the Word, and the leading of the Holy Spirit.”