

# It's a New Day in the PCUSA 2.0

The historic passage of Amendment 14-F,  
extending marriage equality to all.

Isaiah 43:16-21    1 John 4:7-8, 11-12  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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**It's a new day in the PCUSA!!** You may be wondering, however, why today's sermon title adds the qualifier '2.0.' Well, it's because I've already preached a sermon with that title four years ago and used that as an opening line. The occasion, then, was the ratification of an amendment to our church constitution that extended the right of ordination to all in our denomination, including gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons of faith. And now, four years later, **our denomination has amended its constitution with an historic decision to understand marriage in a way so that the right and gift of marriage is extended to all persons, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.**

There are so many of us this day who are deeply grateful to God, and so thankful for the enormous amount of faith, energy, patience, perseverance, and courage that so many people have put into this effort of seeking justice and equality for all members of our denomination. All this would not have been possible without a new **progressive approach to Christianity – the ability to adapt and reform based on the incorporation of new understandings in biblical interpretation and scientific discoveries, like a much better concept of the totality of human sexuality.**

In light of the events of this past week, I can think of no better scripture passages to share this day than Isaiah 43:18-19, where the Old Testament prophet declares the words of God, "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" We do indeed perceive it! And from 1 John 4:7-8, "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love."

I am a pastor who deeply believes in mutual forbearance with those with whom we disagree, in seeking unity in the midst of our diversity, and in understanding that God alone is the Lord of the conscience. Saying that, I nonetheless declare, without reservation, that **loves wins. This is what we can now proudly declare as a denomination when it comes to marriage equality.**

Listen carefully to a portion of the new wording as it will now appear in the Directory of Worship section of our denomination's *Book of Order*.

Marriage is a gift God has given to all humankind for the well-being of the entire human family. Marriage involves a unique commitment between two people, traditionally a man and a woman, to love and support each other for the rest of their lives. The sacrificial love that unites the couple sustains them as faithful and responsible members of the church and the wider community.

In civil law, marriage is a contract that recognizes the rights and obligations of the married couple in society. In the Reformed tradition, marriage is also a covenant in which God has an active part, and which the community of faith publicly witnesses and acknowledges.

There are still many in the Presbyterian Church (USA), however, who do not believe marriage equality should be extended to all. In fact, Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery, of which College Hill is a part, voted down this amendment. Knowing that disagreement over this issue would remain, the official statement concerning marriage also includes this provision:

Nothing herein shall compel a teaching elder [a pastor] to perform nor compel a session to authorize the use of church property for a marriage service that the teaching elder or the session believes is contrary to the teaching elder's or the session's discernment of the Holy Spirit and their understanding of the Word of God.

As many of you are aware, the national General Assembly of our denomination, through an Authoritative Interpretation passed at its meeting in the summer of 2014, already granted pastors the right to marry same-sex couples in states where it was legal, and allowed church sessions to authorize use of its church property should it choose to do so. So if we were already granted this right, why is it such a big deal to change the language concerning marriage in our denomination's church constitution from exclusively "between a man and a woman," to the more inclusive "between two people, traditionally a man and a woman"? After all, both the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America allows individual church ministers to make decisions about officiating at same-sex marriages. The difference is that those denominations have not formally recognized same-sex marriage equality in their respective church constitutions. But the Presbyterians have now done so.

**It makes an enormous difference, and makes a very strong statement to other denominations and to society at-large, that we are willing to put official language affirming marriage equality directly in our church constitution, declaring to all where we stand on this issue.** So while not making a huge impact from a practical standpoint, it makes a powerful difference emotionally and spiritually.

Yet, even as we find reason to rejoice today, this decision is a source of deep fear, hurt, and even anger to many others in our denomination. We need to hear some of that reaction. Paul Detterman, national director of The Fellowship Community, a group of conservative Presbyterians who have stayed in the denomination, said:

Our objection to the passage of the marriage amendment is in no way, shape or form anti-gay. It is in no way intended as anything but concern that the church is capitulating to the culture and is misrepresenting the message of Scripture.

Given the opportunity, I would like to ask him about how he defines 'not anti-gay'. And I would ask what he believes, then, is the message of scripture, if not love. Detterman added, "We definitely will see another wave, a sizable wave, of conservative folks leaving." But to his credit, he said that he and others were staying

because “this conversation is dreadfully important to be a part of.” I respect that, and I admire those who disagree with this new policy for their commitment to stay in the denomination. For I am among those who believe that we are stronger together than if we completely divided into differing theological camps.

Here's another reaction. Carmen Fowler LaBerge, president of the very conservative Presbyterian Lay Committee, that published *The Layman*, also predicted the denomination would lose members, congregations and overseas relationships. She forcefully states:

We regard this vote as a repudiation of the Bible and the clear teaching of the Word of God. This places the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) outside of the fellowship of the global Christian church. And it will be difficult going forward for the PC (USA) to have any moral authority on any other issue.

Really? Ms. LaBerge said she “would be surprised if this were not one step in the direction of compelling pastors to perform and compelling sessions to allow churches to be used for same-sex weddings.” **I wonder how one lives a life of faith with such overwhelming fear.** Yes, many in our denomination clearly do not trust the ‘non-compel’ language that is now included in our constitution. It is very important to note, however, that **no Presbyterian minister has ever been compelled to perform a wedding he or she didn't think appropriate.** This will always be the case according to church law.

I have my own response to those who believe we progressives have caved into culture and are ignoring the Bible. As I stated in a Facebook page post the morning after we learned of the amendment's passage, and as was quoted in a national Presbyterian News article on Friday <http://www.pcusa.org/news/2015/3/20/what-same-sex-marriage-means-presbyterians/>.

Some will say that we have turned our back on the “clear teaching of scripture”. It appears that many Presbyterians now consider that this is not the case. We recognize that cultural biases and prejudices were woven throughout the biblical witness. This recognition has helped lead the Presbyterian Church to change its traditional stance on a number of issues, including slavery, racial equality, and the right of women to be ordained into positions of church leadership. Over the past several decades, through many long and difficult debates and votes, we now understand that church tradition has erred when it comes to recognizing how God's love, grace, and acceptance extends to persons of differing sexual orientations and gender identities.

Many of us also recognize that the biblical passages that condemn same-gender sexual acts are not in reference to couples in a loving mutual covenantal relationship, but rather rightfully condemn relationships that are controlling, abusive, and exploitative.

And that brings me to what I feel is the most important part of all of this – the recognition that **progressive Presbyterians are not capitulating to culture, but rather truly believe that we are following the guidance of the Holy Spirit to this new inclusive understanding of God's grace and love.** It is God who is leading us into finding healing and wholeness for those who have been injured by the long-held traditional biases in organized religion. I concur with the statement released this week by The Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, who put it into perspective this way:

The Presbyterian Peace Fellowship senses the hand of God moving through our church in extending the gift of marriage to all persons who seek to enter into this commitment, regardless of their sexual orientation.

PPF does not see this transformation as merely conforming to secular social changes. Rather, we recognize the Holy Spirit in many of these changes.

And then they added something I think the entire denomination should consider very carefully.

**We repent that the church was among the last, not the first, to express the love of God equally to all. The consequences of our past policies have lent endorsement to discrimination, to families turning away from their own, to hate crimes and violence against gay and lesbian human beings.**

I agree with the assessment that organized religion's traditional perspective toward the LGBTQ community has indeed played a decisively harmful and negative role that has permeated both church and society.

Yet, I also believe that God does indeed seek healing and wholeness for all of creation. Therefore, **it is my hope that we now enter into a new era where the church will extend that healing and wholeness to all those who have been harmed by our denomination's opposition to and discrimination of non-heterosexual persons.**

Yes, God is doing a new thing. It has sprung forth and we have perceived it. It is indeed a new day in the PCUSA! And for the record, **what we have done as a denomination is not re-define marriage, but rather extend and offer to all persons what we have always believed a marriage covenant to be.**

It is true, the denomination will never be the same. For some, that is a source of deep concern and sorrow. For others, including College Hill, it is rightfully a source of deep joy and celebration. Let us live into the words we sang together in our opening hymn: All are welcome in this place!

Thanks be to God.

Amen.