



VOLUME 2
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THE PRESBYTERIAN
PLUMB LINE

The Presbyterian Plumb Line is an online journal published four times a year and designed to biblically inform the Teaching Elders and Ruling Elders of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church about issues that impact our ability to govern under Christ’s authority and faithfully shepherd the flock.

We strive to provide content that is accessible, firmly rooted in God’s Word, spiritually guided, and committed to the highest standards of truth. Through viewpoint and observation, news items, sermons, book reviews, and other material, we seek to lead our denomination toward a more biblical expression of our Presbyterian conviction: that biblically informed elders, seeking the mind of Christ in the courts of the Church, is the most faithful way to align with God’s plumb line.

The editors welcome all inquiries to info@presbyterianplumbline.org.

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Editorial Board

Paul Bammel

Teaching Elder, Presbytery of the East. Ordained in the EPC since 2012.

Don Fortson

Teaching Elder, Presbytery of the Central Carolinas. Ordained in the EPC since 1991.

Peter Larson

Teaching Elder, Presbytery of the Midwest. Ordained in the EPC since 2008.

Gordon Miller

Ruling Elder, New River Presbytery. Ordained in the EPC since 2007.

David Weber

Teaching Elder, New River Presbytery. Ordained in the EPC since 2008.

Note from the Plumb Line Editors

There is breaking news to report. In the EPC's January and February presbytery meetings, four presbyteries have passed an overture that would resolve the current crisis in the EPC over same sex attraction (SSA) and ordination. Commissioners to the 2026 General Assembly will now have the opportunity to vote in favor of a proposed Book of Government amendment that would prohibit SSA persons from being ordained to office in the EPC — see “Presbyteries Consider Overture on Same Sex Attraction” on page 27.

On pages 4-23 you will find four new articles. We want to draw special attention to the article on pages 4-7 co-written by authors outside the EPC. “Yes, God is ‘Anti-Gay’” was written by Rosaria Butterfield and Jared Moore. Dr. Butterfield's testimony of God redeeming her homosexual past is well known. She tells her story in *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert: An English Professor's Journey into Christian Faith* (Crown and Covenant, 2012). Dr. Moore is the author of *The Lust of the Flesh: Thinking Biblically About “Sexual Orientation” Attraction, and Temptation* (Free Grace Press, 2024). This previously published co-authored article is so solid in its clarity on what Scripture says about homosexuality that we have reprinted the full article with permission. If you need a succinct, go-to explanation of what Christians need to know about same-sex attraction, we know of nothing better out there.

On pages 8-12, TE Don Fortson discusses the Ad Interim Committee's latest proposal for an amendment to the Book of Government. He argues the amendment still doesn't specifically

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answer the SSA and ordination question. On pages 13-14, TE Nate Atwood, Moderator of the 29th General Assembly, describes his personal experience with three same-sex attracted pastors and how they harmfully shaped local church ministry. On pages 15-19, TE Peter Larson deals with the issue of pastoral stress and the inadequacy of frequently recommended solutions, pointing to the ultimate answers that Scripture provides.

Also in this issue, we have news items on a recent Permanent Judicial Committee ruling (page 24), a congregation leaving its association with the EPC due to the homosexual issue (page 29), and the “Moderator’s Meanderings” by Gordon Miller (page 20). We hope you find all the items in this issue informative and encouraging in your walk with Christ.

As the editors of the Plumb Line, our goal is to build up the church according to the plumb line of Scripture (Amos 7). We are extremely grateful for your support and encouragement and ask that you please pray for us.

Previous issues are available at www.presbyterianplumbline.org/archive, where they can also be downloaded in printable PDF format. As always, we welcome and value your comments.

If you would like to contribute to the Plumb Line financially or submit an article for consideration, we invite you to contact us at info@presbyterianplumbline.org.

Yes, God is ‘Anti-Gay’

By Rosaria Butterfield and Jared Moore

Originally published on ClearTruth Media, June 19, 2025. Reprinted by permission of the authors and Clear Truth Media. The Plumb Line Editors appreciate the support and prayers of Drs. Butterfield and Moore.

Is God anti-gay?

Yes, God is anti-gay.

The God of the Bible is anti-gay, and the gods of this world are pro-gay.

We have walked the long road with prodigals and their parents. Some have been led by the nose by the false idea that homosexuality is a permanent feature of some people’s humanity and that God loves homosexuality. This grievous heresy has denied an entire generation of young people the repentance needed to fight sin and grow in Christ. We want you to know the truth: you need to hate your sin without hating yourself.

God is anti-gay because God is anti-sin. As Dr. Barry York says, “SSA (same-sex attraction) is SSA (sinful sexual attraction).” Too many people have shipwrecked their Christian lives by not knowing where the battle line is drawn and waiting too late to repent of sin. Sin starts with your heart, not your actions. Any ministry or Christian that restricts sin to actions and not the desires that fuel them (Revoice and the Center for Faith, Sexuality, & Gender), or teaches that same-sex attraction is sinful temptation, a form of fallenness, but not sin proper, is leading people astray. This last obfuscation truly boggles the mind. If the word sinful means “filled with sin,” how can something be “filled with sin” but not sin-proper? How can anyone fight an enemy when fellow Christians blur their ability to see sin as sin and even tell them not to repent of it?

Homosexuality is neither normal nor safe nor redeemable for the service of God. And we are not picking on homosexuality and ignoring other sexual sins. All sin is treason against a holy God.

Still, we reject the common assumption that other (hetero)sexual transgressions are of greater concern because they present as “more prevalent sins”. Pornography, adultery, and masturbation are normalized by our anti-Christian age, but they are not lionized and defended by civil law as a social good and civil right carried forth by a “minority” people group. Indeed, God is anti-gay because God is love. He loves His creation and the created order, and homosexuality is, at its root, rebellion against the created order. Homosexuality is found in the fallen flesh, forbidden by the law of God, and overcome in the Savior, and this is part of the good news of the gospel.

Homosexuality is Found in the Flesh:

God created male and female in His image as a purposeful pattern (Genesis 1:26-28). He created Adam first and then said it was not good for Adam to be alone, so He formed Eve from Adam's rib (Genesis 2:18-22). God brought Eve to Adam, and Adam recognized her as "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (v. 23). Adam called her woman because "she was taken out of man" (v. 23). God ordained marriage for procreation and stewardship. Adam and Eve set the pattern for humanity, and this pattern includes marriage as normative (Genesis 2:24). God designed men and women for one another, but this perfect design was marred when sin entered the Garden through the serpent's lies.

God forbade eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but the serpent told Eve that God was not telling her the truth. Looking at the tree through Satan's point of view, she "saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise" (Genesis 3:6). The word "desired" is translated "covet" in the 10th Commandment (Exodus 20:17; Deuteronomy 5:21). Eve desired or coveted the forbidden fruit before she ate it. She created attraction for the tree in her heart by listening to the serpent. She began sinning in her heart before she tasted the fruit from the forbidden tree with her mouth. This means that the beginning of sinful attraction, desire, inclination, or impulse is sin proper, not "fallenness" or "brokenness." Covetousness violates the 10th Commandment ("thou shalt not covet"). The 10th Commandment prohibits the sin that precedes action. Coveting what God has put off limits to you is contrary to Him, and any impulse or desire in us that is contrary to God is sin.

Importantly, the "you" in Genesis 3:1-5 is plural ("you all"): "for in the day you (all) eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (v. 5). Because of her sinful desire, she ate and gave some to her husband (who was standing right there). Adam, the federal head, stands as the responsible agent for the sin they — and now we — share. Due to their sin, which is a twisting of God's good design, the lust of the flesh plunged all of humanity into sin. Now, we are all conceived in sin (Psalm 51:5), and Adam's sinful flesh is in all of mankind (1 Corinthians 15:22). All that is contrary to God in us comes from Adam's sin, which is now our sinful flesh.

Nevertheless, God's good design, as reflected in our being made in His image, remains. Sin mars, but does not change, what it means to be human, to be made male and female in the image of God, to be made for the purpose of being fruitful and multiplying, filling and stewarding the earth. The normative command is that the pattern of sexual difference (male and female) is heterosexual. You cannot, according to God's creation ordinance, separate sex from sexuality.

But the category of sexual orientation, a 19th-century Freudian category mistake, does just this — it separates sex from sexuality. The American Psychological Association defines sexual orientation as "an enduring emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction that one feels toward men,

toward women, or toward both.” The modernist invention of “homosexual orientation” asserts that sexual attraction is independent from being male or female, which is only possible because of the sin of our flesh. If you can separate your sexual attraction from your sex, then you are rejecting God’s creation ordinance as binding and true, and you are defining yourself based on how you may feel rather than what God has made and blessed.

Homosexuality is Forbidden in the Law of God:

The Bible teaches that homosexuality is a perversion—a twisting and deforming of what God calls good—and not a “fallen” personality trait. Homosexuality occurs when “a man lies with a male as with a woman” (Leviticus 20:13), when he exchanges his natural relations with a woman for a man (Romans 1:26-27), when he holds in his heart a “dishonorable passion” (Romans 1:26), a “consuming passion” (Romans 1:27), and the coveting of a forbidden object (Matthew 5:28). All of these descriptions reflect things God hates and forbids, not an unchangeable characteristic. Indeed, every scriptural example of homosexuality refers to lust or behavior, showing that homosexual sinners are like all of the other sinners in the Bible:

- Genesis 19:1-11 and Judges 19:16-24 explain how wicked men who were citizens of their cities wanted to know sojourning men as husbands know their wives.
- Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 forbid a man lying with a man as with a woman.
- Romans 1:26-27 describes women and men exchanging the natural use of the opposite sex for the same sex in their hearts and actions.
- 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 says that those who practice homosexuality (in thought and deed) will not inherit the Kingdom of God.
- 1 Timothy 1:9-10 rebukes those who practice homosexuality, acting as men in the sexual act.

The Bible does not regard sexual orientation as a category of personhood because sexual orientation is a 19th-century category mistake. You do not “have” same-sex attraction (like you have brown eyes), and you do not “experience” same sex attraction (like you do a cold or acne). You have a sin nature, and your job is to go to war against that sin nature and its impulses using the power of the Holy Spirit (Jeremiah 17:9).

Homosexuality is Overcome by the Savior:

Anyone who wants to minister the gospel of grace to people overcome by homosexual desire must firmly understand why God is anti-gay. God is anti-gay because God is love, and therefore, God is anti-sin. But God doesn’t just condemn sin and leave us to suffer with no help or cure. The Lord Jesus Christ became sin on the cross so that His people would be ransomed into the grace of forgiveness and the progressive victory over sin as we fight against our sin nature in the power of the Spirit’s grace. But the sexual sinner must fight with active and sincere repentance

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and drive a fresh nail into their homosexual sin a thousand times a day. You must not be passive and call sin by any other name.

Galatians 5:17 records the daily battle of every Christian: “For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish”. The blood of Christ is no ally to the sin of homosexual desire because the blood of Christ does not make an ally to the sin it crushes on the cross. Christ can change homosexual patterns of sin just like He can change any pattern of sin. Yes, sexual sin runs deep, and yes, the battle is fierce, but God is for you in this fight. In His power, Christians can repent and live according to God’s design for us as male or female.

If you have sinned in homosexual desire, lust, or sex, you are not “called” to lifelong celibacy; you are called to repentance. The first step in repentance is admitting that “gay” is not who you are. Instead, you are male or female with a pathological sin pattern that Jesus Christ can change. Repent of your evil desires and trust in Christ. Live His morality from your heart and keep repenting of indwelling sin until it is put to death. Yes, you will fight your sin nature for as long as you live on earth, but that does not mean that your indwelling sin patterns remain fixed. Sanctification is a progressive and real process, and God changes the affections of the heart, conforming the repenting believer to walk in His truth. Jesus Christ is worth the fight against our sinful nature because the tomb is empty — He sits at the right hand of God the Father, interceding on your behalf and leading you to greater and greater victory. Because you are male or female, you can love and marry an opposite sex Christian. But you will not experience any such victory if you keep one foot in the gay camp, telling yourself that your sin is your “sexual orientation.”

Conclusion:

Freud or God, which way, Christian? Every generation must defend the gospel anew and protect its young people from Satan’s devices. You are not who you feel you are. You are who God says you are. Neither your flesh nor your feelings determine your identity. God does, and He created you male or female, including your sexuality.

By rejecting the modern myth of “sexual orientation,” submitting to salvation by grace through faith in Christ, and agreeing with God’s law in the Bible, you can live a godly life from your heart in obedience to God, by His Holy Spirit. Having trusted in Christ, daily freedom in Christ from false identities is yours for the taking and living, if you will live in humble repentance according to God’s design for you.

God is anti-gay. The question is, “Are you?” If not, you are opposing God and who He created you to be. You cannot kick against God’s design and have joy in Him at the same time. If you are anti-gay, then enjoy Christ above all by repenting of every form of homosexual desire in you. The fight is worth it because Christ is worth it.

New Ad Interim Committee BoG Amendment Insufficient

By Don Fortson
TE, Presbytery of the Central Carolinas

There is much to commend in the new Book of Government (BoG) amendment (12-17-25 Draft)¹ offered by the Ad Interim Committee (AIC). It reflects many Biblical principles that would be imperative for church officers. Ultimately, it's not what the amendment says that is problematic, but *what it does not say*. This revision still does not make it clear that same-sex attracted (SSA) persons would not qualify for church office. It is obvious that the AIC does not want to single out SSA persons in the BoG amendment, however the specific question of whether or not we will ordain SSA officers is the specific question at hand! Why the resistance to address this question directly?

In this article we will examine the new AIC BoG amendment, showing how it leaves the door open to SSA ordination. We will also look at an alternative amendment adopted by a number of EPC presbyteries that clearly closes the door of ordination to SSA persons. These two alternative amendments give the EPC a real choice. Will we allow Sessions and Presbyteries to ordain gay persons to church office as the AIC report permits, or will we maintain the historic position of the EPC?

New AIC Amendment is Side B Friendly

The AIC amendment recommends the following be added to BoG 9-3.B:

“Officers in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church must be above reproach in their walk and Christlike in their character. While office bearers will see spiritual perfection only in glory, they will continue in this life to confess and to mortify remaining sins in light of God’s work of progressive sanctification. Therefore, to be qualified for office, they must affirm *the sinfulness of fallen desires*, the reality and hope of progressive sanctification, and be committed to the *pursuit of Spirit-empowered victory* over their sinful temptations, inclinations, and actions.”

The AIC amendment states that church officers “**must affirm the sinfulness of fallen desires.**” This language, while Biblical, is insufficient to meet the question at hand. This wording mirrors the circumlocution used by Side B gay Christians [Side B is celibate homosexuality] to affirm that their SSA experience is a result of the Fall while denying their SSA experience *is* sin. That is, a person experiencing SSA is not morally culpable for his or her same-sex desires. This is the gay Christian theology of Greg Johnson and Side B. This statement allows room for a SSA person to acknowledge same-sex desires are rooted in the Fall, while simultaneously denying SSA itself is sin — therefore, claiming a gay identity with no hope of freedom from SSA. These

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are the verbal games being played by Side B advocates. Perhaps this was not the intent of the AIC language, but this is how it can be interpreted.

One observes similar thinking in the “Pastoral Letter on Human Sexuality” in which it is stated: **“The ongoing experience of temptation is not a sign of sin or lack of sanctification.”** This statement would appear to endorse SSA as fixed, since ongoing experience of SSA is not sin. On the contrary, James 1:14 states, *“But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.”*

Evil desires within the human heart can’t be blamed on God, nor are they morally neutral. They are sin. Same-sex temptations, desires, lusts, and acts are all sin according to Scripture. Experiencing ongoing SSA is a sign of sin and a lack of sanctification. The Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 139 states that “sodomy and *all unnatural desires*” are forbidden by the seventh commandment. The Biblical proof texts for “all unnatural desires” are Romans 1:24, 26-27 and Leviticus 20:15-16. If one has continuing SSA experience, he is not mature in sanctification but needs repentance, pastoral care, and discipleship. It would be irresponsible to place such a person in church office — it would not be safe for his soul nor the souls of those to whom he would minister.

Another insufficient part of the AIC amendment is the statement that officers must “be committed to *the pursuit of spirit-empowered victory* over their sinful temptations, inclinations, and actions.” It is agreed all believers should pursue spirit empowered victory over sin, yet church officers should *have experienced spirit-empowered victory* if indeed they are spiritually mature in Christ. It’s not enough to be in pursuit — there must be victorious fruit. There should be a strong track record of overcoming sinful desires in one’s life. The WCF 13:3 states:

“Although the old nature temporarily wins battles in this warfare, the continual strengthening of the sanctifying Spirit of Christ enables the regenerate nature in each believer *to overcome*. And so the saints grow in grace, *perfecting holiness* in the fear of God.”

The Confession is borrowing language from 2 Corinthians 7:1, “... let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body, and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.” This should be both the aspiration and experience of any church officer. Only mature believers are called to leadership in Christ’s church.

Presbytery BoG Amendment Answers the Question

Thankfully, there is another option. A more useful overture that is allied with the historic position of the EPC has been considered by several presbyteries and approved by four: Pacific Northwest², New River, Florida and the Caribbean, and Central Carolinas. It specifically

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addresses SSA ordination. The overture — which I call the “Allied overture” — recommends this amendment to BoG 9-3.A:

“Therefore, persons eligible for church office shall conform in heart, mind, and conduct to God’s design for human sexuality, embracing with gratitude the calling of either chastity in singleness or fidelity within marriage between one man and one woman. *Those who profess, persist in, or identify with unnatural desires or affections, contrary to God’s created order and condemned by Scripture as against nature, are disqualified from holding office in Christ’s Church.*

See Romans 1:26–27 on desires contrary to God’s created order; Genesis 1–2 on the creation of male and female; Westminster Larger Catechism Q.139 on the moral duties of Christians and the proper ordering of affection.”

The Allied overture addresses directly the Biblical issues that apply to someone professing SSA and seeking ordination. A person with ongoing SSA experience would not qualify for ordination, and the BoG amendment simply states this fact. This amendment is fulfilling the task that the AIC amendment will not accomplish. The footnote at the end of the amendment supplies the Biblical foundation of its assertions.

What’s at stake here is the Biblical and Reformed understanding of ministry. Overcoming sinful temptations, inclinations, and actions is expected of deacons, elders, and ministers who can say with St. Paul “imitate me as I imitate Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1). The EPC Book of Worship underscores this truth in its comments about preaching:

“... preaching demands study, meditation, prayer, and time for adequate preparation. *Above all, that which is preached should be exemplified in the life of the preacher.*” (BoW 2-6.B).

A pastor who identifies as SSA can’t preach with credibility. His ongoing SSA nullifies his testimony as a minister of the transforming gospel of Jesus Christ. The Presbytery amendment states clearly and positively the Biblical, Reformed, and orthodox position of the EPC — a position consistent with the 2000-year history of the Church on the issue of homosexuality.

Pastorally, can we ever say, “God may not deliver you from your sin”? When there is failure to find freedom, it is a sign of ongoing sin in one’s life. The Holy Spirit has not failed, the sinner has failed; and yes, it is a sign of undeveloped sanctification. For example, if a professing Christian has an ongoing desire for pornography, he is a severely struggling believer who needs pastoral care. Telling him, “God may not deliver you from this,” and “would you like to be a ruling elder in our congregation?” would be absurd. The AIC documents seem to have bought into the falsehood that homosexual inclination may be fixed for believers — that’s a denial of the

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gospel of transforming grace. We must not embrace such a sub-Christian view of sanctification that violates what our constitution teaches (e.g., WCF 13.3).

Why is the Allied Overture Necessary?

It is imperative that we all understand the historical trajectory that has made the Allied overture necessary.

First, a determined effort is underway in the AIC on SSA to change the ordination standards of the EPC by permitting the ordination to office of those “experiencing SSA” (present tense). Realize that SSA is just another way to say “homosexual.”

Second, the AIC is *not* recommending that the constitution be changed to accommodate celibate homosexuals. No, it is recommending a change to the Pastoral Letter on Human Sexuality that would give Sessions and Presbyteries “counsel” in examining those who “experience SSA.” That “counsel” effectively gives Sessions and Presbyteries permission to ordain these individuals.⁴

In the EPC, a Pastoral Letter has *no constitutional authority*. But if approved by the 46th Assembly next June, it will effectively (but unconstitutionally) allow for the ordination of SSA persons to church office. In addition, by giving Sessions and Presbyteries permission to ordain them, it makes ordaining them in the EPC a “non-essential” in that we will “agree to disagree” on a matter that has destroyed the gospel testimony of countless Protestant denominations in the U.S.

At the 45th General Assembly last year a network lunch was convened by the AIC. Commissioners were given the opportunity to ask questions and provide feedback to the committee. The fact that the AIC recommendations on SSA were ambiguous and not constitutional was communicated to the committee in that luncheon and in the feedback the AIC received online in the weeks after the Assembly. Based on the feedback the AIC was given, there were reasonable expectations that the August 27 edition of the AIC report would reflect that input. However, the August 27 edition of the AIC report⁵ made clear that that input — address SSA clearly, directly, and constitutionally, had been ignored. The updated AIC amendment (12-7-26 Draft)⁶ still does not specifically address the question of SSA and ordination!

There was no change in the ambiguity of the “counsel” and rationale for opening the door to the ordination of celibate homosexuals in the pastoral letter. There was no constitutional amendment addressing the ordination of celibate homosexuals. Having been told by the AIC that it wanted input into their work and having found that input ignored is what sparked the creation of the Allied overture. So here we are with the AIC’s report on SSA which is voluminous, page after page after page of words that do not address and resolve the matter of SSA and ordination. The Allied overture’s amendment to the Constitution is a mere *70 words* and would clearly resolve the issue of SSA and ordination in the EPC.

Conclusion: This is a Gospel Issue

The issue of SSA and ordination is a gospel issue. Underlying support for ordaining celibate gay persons is a presupposition that homosexuality may be a fixed sexuality. This is a lie of modern culture. According to Scripture, in Christ, persons with sexual attraction to someone of the same gender can experience freedom from this bondage like any other sin. SSA is grievous sin against God's design for humanity as male and female, created sexually for one another. When someone with SSA is born again, the Holy Spirit enables one to progressively kill this sin within their desires and experience freedom. A host of believers bear witness to this transformation in their lives, including Christian marriage. The gospel is not just forgiving grace, it is transforming grace. An assertion that SSA is static is a denial of the New Birth, and thus a denial of the gospel. The good news about Jesus Christ is both forgiveness and new life. Ordained officers in the Church live in Christian freedom, not bondage to ongoing sin.

One of the most powerful conversion stories in Christianity is that of St. Augustine. In the *Confessions* he chronicles his long journey to faith and transformation. Augustine tells of his unwillingness to give up the sinful sexual desires in his life until Christ changed his heart. After a dramatic encounter with a text from Romans that shook him to the core, Augustine describes the transformation that took place in the opening of book nine:

“And what at one time I feared to lose, it was now a joy to me to put away. For thou didst cast them away from me, Thou true and highest sweetness. Thou didst cast them away, and instead of them didst enter in Thyself. Now was my soul free from the gnawing cares of seeking and getting, and of wallowing and exciting the itch of lust. And I babbled unto Thee my brightness, my riches, and my health, the Lord my God.”

St. Augustine eventually became a bishop, but without the new birth and a transformed life, including freedom from the lusts of his former life, he would never have been a leader in the Christian Church. A transformed life is a prerequisite for pastoral ministry.

¹ See <https://presbyterianplumbline.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/BookOfGovernment-December17Draft.pdf>

² For an example of this overture, see <https://presbyterianplumbline.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/PNW-Overture-to-the-46th-GA.pdf>

³ See the right column of <https://presbyterianplumbline.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/PNW-Overture-to-the-46th-GA.pdf>, pages 8-20.

⁴ See <https://presbyterianplumbline.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/Pastoral-Letter-Comparison-Presbytery-Distribution.pdf>

⁵ See https://presbyterianplumbline.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/AIC_Book-of-Government.pdf

⁶ See <https://presbyterianplumbline.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/BookOfGovernment-December17Draft.pdf>

My Personal Experience with SSA Pastors

By Nate Atwood

TE, Presbytery of the Central Carolinas

For most of us, the question of ordaining a “same sex attracted but celibate” pastor is a theoretical conversation. Not for me. In my 43 years of ministry, three of the four churches I have served have had an SSA pastor. In each instance, though the circumstances vary, each of these pastors would have been ordainable under the second draft of the AIC report. And in each case, though at first their ministries went well, before long the damage was done.

Before I begin, I want to say the stories I’m about to tell have become a matter of public record, or the people directly involved have gone home to be with the Lord. I also want to say that though the pastors involved struggled with SSA, each had many admirable qualities and formidable gifts.

My first story comes from my seminary days, serving as a pastoral intern. While excited to serve at this particular church, over time I began to sense that there was an undefined inner tension in the church. Increasingly, I realized that the center of this tension was the senior pastor himself. I began to wonder if he struggled with homosexuality. Despite my personal concerns, my wife and I were stunned when the senior pastor’s wife later approached us, asking if we thought he was a homosexual. Her suspicions were later confirmed. In retrospect, I do not believe he ever acted out his SSA and yet the church could never really flourish. His private struggles shaped the landscape around us. Though many fine people — including the senior pastor himself — worked hard, we never truly entered into the renewal we all sought.

I was then blessed to spend eight years at St. Giles, where Percy Burns and his wife, Sara Jo, were a model we could all look to. We took it for granted, of course, but in retrospect I see the strength we all drew from their ongoing love story. Biblical marriage and family were front and center at St. Giles because the senior pastor and his wife lived it ... from the heart. How important is family to the Church? Read the Bible.

My next journey into the world of SSA pastors followed my years at St. Giles. I succeeded a senior pastor who later described himself as “SSA but celibate” although only more senior members of church leadership knew this. Despite the attempt at discretion, people increasingly became uneasy about his friendships with some men. Perhaps even more damaging, was that he and his wife were incapable of freely living out the kind of love story St. Giles witnessed in Percy and Sara Jo. How can you teach what you do not live and cannot model? While we tend to think that it’s the presence of sin which is most damaging to a congregation, even more damage can be done by the absence of truth. Because there was no clear teaching or example, family began to suffer in this church. Both divorce and sexual immorality crept into too many lives. When Helen and I arrived at this church, the hunger to reset the table with regard to marriage,

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family, and holiness was palpable. As we partnered with the Session and many wonderful church members, the church genuinely entered into revival. Those were remarkable years.

I was then called as senior pastor to a church which, in the previous decade, had lived through the trauma of their senior pastor being caught in a homosexual affair with a man in the congregation. For years he had kept his SSA under wraps and so would have met with the ordination standard proposed by the AIC. Finally, he did so no longer. It is a tribute to the Lord and His people that the church survived.

What Helen and I learned after we arrived was that despite the years that had passed — and fine pastoral leadership in the interim — the hurt and confusion still lingered. While any church can suffer from hurting marriages and broken families, we saw far too much of this. It quickly became clear that the church as a whole and under the heading of “compassion” had lowered Biblical standards. We were further dismayed when we found both unbiblical remarriage and sexual immorality among those in leadership positions. No wonder grace had become “cheap grace.”

At times I felt a bit like a visitor to Hiroshima weeks after the atomic explosion. The “blast” had happened years ago when the SSA senior pastor crossed the line, but the ongoing “radiation” of disappointment, distrust, and moral compromise hung in the air. As in my previous church, it was an honor to work with many fine elders and congregants to rebuild family, holiness, and grace that not only forgives our sin but changes our lives. Once again, God was good to all of us.

In each of these situations — the good as well as the bad — I believe the Lord gave me a unique vantage point on the ordination requirements of Scripture. I read the presumed heterosexuality of “husband of one wife” (1 Timothy 3:2) with a deepened sensitivity to what happens when this obvious standard is ignored. Friends, let me be blunt. It doesn’t work. In my experience, ordaining those who have an ongoing struggle with SSA leads to inevitable congregational damage, disappointment, and distrust.

When I read the various documents generated by the AIC, their concern for those who struggle with SSA is obvious. I appreciate the pastoral heart. However, when it comes to ordination, isn’t our first responsibility to the health of those churches we help to oversee? Don’t we all know that healthy churches depend in no small part on healthy marriages, most especially for those ordained? If we don’t know that, shouldn’t we? When I began my ministry, I had no idea the Lord would place me in so many churches where there had been an SSA pastor. Take it from a veteran of many campaigns, those who struggle with SSA and who seek repentance must certainly be welcomed in our pews. But they don’t belong in our pulpits or serving on our Sessions.

The Goldilocks Dilemma: Why the EPC's Middle Way Cannot Hold

*By Shawn Constance
RE, Central South Presbytery*

In the beloved fairy tale “Goldilocks and the Three Bears,” Goldilocks rejects the bowls of porridge that are too hot and too cold, choosing instead the porridge that is “just right.” It is a charming children’s story. But when applied to denominational identity, the search for “just right” and a middle way can lead to inevitable conflict.

For over 45 years, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church has tried to steer a middle course among Presbyterian denominations. Unlike the PC(USA) — too liberal — and the PCA — too rigid on secondary matters — the EPC offered a safe haven for those who were committed to confessional orthodoxy while granting liberty in non-essentials. The denomination’s founding motto captures this vision: “In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.”

This wasn’t a pragmatic compromise. The EPC’s founders believed they were recovering something both Biblical and historically Reformed — a way to unite around Westminster’s doctrinal core while avoiding needless division over truly secondary matters. For four decades, the EPC has managed to maintain this “just right” vision and preserve its peace, purity, and unity.

However, what if the middle way — however well-intentioned — rests on structural tension? What if the current debate on same-sex attraction has exposed a gap between the EPC’s constitutional commitments and its practice — a conflict the founding vision cannot resolve? What happens when we cannot agree on what is essential?

The Theological Vision

The EPC’s founding vision was neither naïve nor unprincipled. It emerged from a specific theological conviction: that Reformed unity could be preserved by distinguishing between the *system* of doctrine contained in Westminster and *particular applications* left to Christian liberty.

The framers believed officers could “sincerely receive and adopt” the Westminster Standards and Book of Order as containing Scripture’s system of doctrine, while presbyteries retained freedom to judge stated exceptions — “scruples” not at odds with that system. The “Essentials of the Faith” — a seven-point summary covering Scripture’s authority, the Trinity, human sinfulness, Christ’s person and work, justification by faith, the Spirit’s work in regeneration and sanctification, and Christ’s return — would serve as a unifying doctrinal center. Beyond matters clearly touching the system of doctrine, charity and presbytery judgment would guide practice.

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This model has genuine appeal. It honors the Westminster Standards through system subscription while allowing officers to state exceptions on matters not essential to the system. It creates space for evangelicals who share core Reformed convictions but differ on baptism mode, eschatological timing, or how they apply the regulative principle.

Can the Model Hold?

The question isn't whether the EPC's vision is attractive. It is. The question is whether the gap between constitutional commitment and actual practice can be sustained without undermining confessional integrity.

Here's the tension: Westminster is comprehensive. It addresses not only the gospel but also ecclesiology, the sacraments, the moral law, worship, and officer qualifications. Officers who subscribe to Westminster "sincerely receive and adopt" it — along with the Book of Order — as containing the system of doctrine taught in Scripture. Presbyteries judge whether stated exceptions are "out of accord with any fundamental of our system of doctrine."

Constitutionally, the EPC affirms Westminster's binding authority. In practice, however, the combination of system subscription, presbytery discretion, and the Essentials as a constitutional summary can drift toward doctrinal minimalism. When presbyteries exercise broad discretion without clear boundaries, the Essentials can become a de facto floor rather than a unifying center within a broader confessional framework.

The result isn't structural subordination of Westminster to the Essentials — the constitution doesn't say that. But the practical result can feel very similar: Westminster gets affirmed in principle, while some presbyteries treat matters outside the seven Essentials as open to nearly unlimited liberty.

For forty years, this approach worked. The disputed issues — women's ordination (a specific constitutional carve-out), charismatic gifts, eschatology — could plausibly be treated as genuinely secondary without undermining Reformed orthodoxy. But now, the same-sex debate has threatened to change the equation.

Why the SSA Debate is Different

The EPC is considering a report by the Ad Interim Committee on Same-Sex Attraction that would permit presbyteries to ordain celibate candidates who identify with same-sex attraction, provided they meet certain pastoral conditions. Although wrapped in ambiguous language, the report strongly suggests that a person who identifies as homosexual and experiences ongoing same-sex attraction would not be disqualified from being ordained.

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The proposed language uses strong Biblical terminology. It affirms that same-sex attraction is disordered and sinful, a result of the fall. It maintains the church's historic teaching on sexual ethics. It calls for repentance and mortification of sinful desires. But it also grants presbyteries constitutional discretion to ordain celibate SSA candidates. That's where the confessional tension emerges.

This isn't primarily a pastoral question about how to love struggling believers. It's a confessional question about anthropology, sanctification, and officer qualifications.

Consider what Westminster teaches. The Larger Catechism (Q. 75–77) describes sanctification as the Spirit's work of renewing the whole person after God's image, enabling mortification of sin and vivification of grace. Sin isn't simply outward behavior; it includes inward corruption and sinful inclinations (WCF 6.5). Sanctification involves the progressive weakening of sinful desires and the growth of holy affections.

When a candidate publicly identifies with an abiding same-sex attraction — not as remaining corruption being mortified, but as a descriptor of personal identity — what does this communicate about sanctification? About the nature of remaining sin? About the extent of gospel transformation?

Westminster Confession 12–13 teaches that believers are adopted and assured, yet sanctification remains real and progressive. The Confession assumes that sin, even remaining sin, should be named, confessed, and mortified — not embraced as identity.

Officer qualifications (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6–7) require that elders be “above reproach” — not sinless but marked by evident godliness and a life that honors the gospel publicly. The church has always understood this to include not only outward conduct but also the testimony of progressive sanctification.

If presbyteries may grant liberty on this question — if officer qualifications, sanctification, and anthropology can be treated as matters not touching the system of doctrine — then what remains binding in Westminster beyond the seven-point Essentials summary?

The Pattern We've Seen Before

This pattern isn't new. The Presbyterian Church (USA) followed a similar trajectory. The Auburn Affirmation of 1924 argued that doctrines like the virgin birth, the inerrancy of Scripture, and substitutionary atonement were “theories” about which Christians could charitably differ. Each controversy expanded the category of non-binding matters. Each step seemed reasonable in isolation. But the cumulative effect hollowed out confessional identity.

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The PC(USA) didn't drift by explicitly rejecting Westminster. It drifted by making "pastoral allowances," by granting discretion on disputed matters — by appealing to charity and unity while quietly eroding doctrinal boundaries.

I don't say this to suggest the EPC is doomed to repeat the PC(USA)'s path. The EPC's constitution is stronger, and its evangelical commitments are real. But the mechanism is eerily similar: an expanding category of matters treated as outside the binding system of doctrine, a functional minimalism that doesn't match constitutional intent, and an appeal to charity that overrides confessional clarity.

Two Paths Forward (Neither is "Just Right")

The EPC now faces a choice. The gap between Confessional commitment and denominational practice is no longer sustainable. The denomination must either strengthen confessional accountability or continue expanding discretionary liberty until confessional substance is functionally lost.

- **Path 1: Drift into minimalism.** Some presbyteries continue to expand the range of non-binding matters. The seven-point Essentials become the de facto standard. Westminster becomes a historical document — honored in subscription vows but not enforced in practice. This is the PC(USA) trajectory.
- **Path 2: Fragmentation without clarity.** The EPC constitutionally affirms Westminster fidelity, but without clear boundaries or consistent enforcement. Presbyteries diverge sharply. Some ordain celibate SSA candidates; others refuse. Some ordain women (under the constitutional carve-out); others don't. The "big tent" tears along predictable fault lines. This is the Anglican Communion's path — organizational unity without doctrinal coherence, eventually leading to irreconcilable division.

The most troubling reality? The EPC currently shows signs of both paths simultaneously.

A Third Path: Principled Reform

But there's a third option. The EPC could clarify how system subscription applies to disputed questions, strengthen officer examination standards, and define legitimate areas of presbytery discretion more explicitly. This requires distinguishing between matters truly secondary (baptism mode, millennial views, worship styles) and matters touching the core system of doctrine (sanctification, officer qualifications, sexual ethics, anthropology).

This isn't abandoning the EPC's founding vision — it is fulfilling it. The founders intended liberty on genuinely non-essential matters and bounded discretion on others, not liberty to redefine which parts of Westminster are binding.

Here's what principled reform might look like:

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1. **Clarify what “system subscription” means.** Presbyteries must articulate what constitutes an exception “out of accord with any fundamental of our system of doctrine.” Does Westminster’s doctrine of sanctification bind its teachings on the nature of sin and holiness? If so, how?
2. **Strengthen officer examinations.** Sessions and presbyteries must examine candidates not only on the seven Essentials but also on sanctification, holiness, and the mortification of sin. Candidates should articulate how the gospel is transforming their desires — not merely managing their behavior.
3. **Distinguish pastoral care from officer standards.** The church must love, disciple, and walk with all believers struggling with sin, including sexual sin. But pastoral compassion doesn’t require lowering officer standards or treating sanctification as optional.
4. **Reclaim charity grounded in truth.** The EPC’s motto rightly elevates charity. But charity divorced from truth becomes sentimentalism. Real charity requires clarity about what Scripture teaches, what the church confesses, and what God requires of those who lead.

This path won’t be easy. It may cost the denomination some congregations. But it offers confessional integrity without fragmentation, and unity grounded in truth rather than functional minimalism.

Clarity is Charity

The EPC has long prized charity as its highest virtue — and rightly so. But charity without truth is mere sentimentalism. Charity that refuses to name error or clarify boundaries is cowardice or indifference. Real charity requires clarity: clarity about what Scripture teaches, what the church confesses, and what the church requires of its officers.

Clarity is charity to the candidate, who deserves to know what’s expected. Clarity is charity to the congregation, who have a right to leaders whose lives commend the gospel. Clarity is charity to the watching world, which needs to see that the church takes truth seriously.

The EPC’s founding motto — “In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity” — is worthy. But it requires discernment to distinguish the essential from the non-essential. And that discernment can’t be left to sentiment, pragmatism, or unbounded presbytery discretion. It must be grounded in Scripture and the church’s confessional standards.

The Goldilocks Problem

Goldilocks wanted porridge that was “just right” — not too hot, not too cold. However, the fairy tale does not have a happy ending. In the end, Goldilocks is confronted by the three bears and runs away into the forest. The EPC’s “just right” middle way has held the denomination together for 45 years, but can it continue? Either Westminster is binding as the system of doctrine, or it is

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advisory and optional. Either the standards for ordination are clearly enforced and understood, or they are subjective and negotiable. The attempt to hold both positions — strict subscription in theory, broad discretion in practice — leads not to wisdom but to incoherence.

The Choice Ahead

The EPC stands at a crossroads. The choice can no longer be avoided. Will the denomination clarify its confessional boundaries and strengthen officer examination standards, accepting the cost of lost unity if necessary? Or will it continue allowing the gap between constitutional commitment and practice to widen until confessional identity is functionally lost?

The Goldilocks option — the “just right” middle way — cannot hold unless the EPC closes the gap between constitutional commitment and denominational practice. Unlike Goldilocks, we cannot go on choosing lukewarm porridge. We all know what the Lord said about a lukewarm church and it wasn’t good (Revelation 3:16). The time for choosing has come.

The Cult of Self-Care

*By Peter Larson
TE, Midwest Presbytery*

Perhaps never in church history has there been a time when so many pastors have experienced burnout. A recent survey by Barna Research revealed an alarming statistic: 42 percent of pastors have considered quitting the ministry. According to Barna, the leading cause of burnout was stress, followed by loneliness and political division.

Pastors carry a heavy burden. On a regular basis we deal with conflict, trauma, and the often-unreasonable expectations of those we serve. And yet, this epidemic of burnout seems to be a recent phenomenon. In the early church, Christians were beaten and stoned in the streets but endured it with courage and fortitude. Today, most pastors earn a decent salary with paid vacations and pension plans — and yet we complain of burnout.

The COVID pandemic, in particular, revealed a fragility among pastors. Faced with lockdowns, social distancing, and facemask mandates, many pastors battled stress and depression. Suddenly, clergy mental health became a major issue as denominations sought ways to promote pastoral wellness. Increasingly, pastors came to view themselves as patients needing treatment.

Today, self-care has grown into a cult and cottage industry. Experts have emerged offering help and healing. Endless books, podcasts, and webinars advise us to set boundaries, prioritize family, exercise, improve our diet, and maintain a healthy work-life balance. All of this sounds very reasonable. It is, in fact, the same advice dispensed by secular therapists and psychologists.

The problem, however, is that much of this guidance is worldly and unbiblical. At best, it may offer temporary relief. At worst, it can lead to narcissism and an obsessive focus on self. The truth is that ministry is difficult. Stress is not a symptom of unhealth, but confirmation that we are following in the way of our Lord. If you are not experiencing stress in ministry, something is wrong. If you have achieved work-life balance, you are probably a stranger to the cross of Christ. An obsession with wellness is, in fact, unhealthy. Instead of making us more resilient it will make us more fragile. The proof that a soldier has been in combat is not good health but his wounds and battle scars.

When Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness, Satan advised him to turn stones into bread. Of course, Satan had a point. For Jesus to accomplish his earthly ministry, he needed to survive and remain healthy. In other words, Satan was advocating self-care. And yet, Jesus resisted this temptation. He kept his fast and remained obedient to God.

Self-care is our natural instinct. To survive — to preserve our lives — is our strongest impulse. And yet, Jesus calls us to *deny ourselves and take up the cross*. Jesus does not call us to save our

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lives but to lose them. The way of Jesus is both countercultural and counterintuitive; instead of caring for self, we must die to self.

Whatever guidance we give to struggling pastors, it must be based on reality, not an illusion. Above all, it must be based on the Bible, not secular psychology. With this in mind, I offer the following advice to pastors struggling with burnout.

The Call

To preach the gospel and pastor God's flock, you must be called by God. In Romans 10:15, the Apostle Paul observes: "And how are they to preach unless they are sent?" In many of his epistles, Paul begins by establishing his credentials: "Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle." (1 Corinthians 1:1). Paul did not choose to be an apostle. Rather, he was certain God had called him, quite against his will. Becoming a pastor is not just a career choice like becoming a lawyer or electrician. I suspect the reason why so many pastors quit is because they were not called by God. In times of trial, it is the call that sustains us.

The Cost

In his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes how we seek to follow Jesus on our own terms. This, however, is impossible. What Jesus requires is complete surrender and unswerving obedience. We must abandon all of our terms and conditions. We must go wherever He leads and do whatever He commands. If we have not surrendered completely, we will chafe at His will and resist His commands, resulting in inner turmoil. A pastor who attempts to manage his own life and set boundaries will not experience the joy and peace that is only found in complete surrender to the will of God.

Family

Self-care experts often advise us to prioritize our families and put them first. However, Jesus says something quite different. When a man asked Jesus for permission to say goodbye to his family before becoming a disciple, Jesus denied this request (Luke 9:61-62). On another occasion, Jesus declared: "Whoever loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me." (Matthew 10:37-38). It is God who demands our first love and loyalty. Putting our families first is, in fact, idolatry.

When I was a young pastor, my wife suffered a miscarriage in the ninth month of pregnancy. We listened for a heartbeat but heard only silence. Grief-stricken, we returned home from the hospital when suddenly there was a knock at the door. It was a young woman from our church who was depressed and suicidal. My first impulse was to send her away and schedule an appointment for the next day. Instead, I invited her to come in for prayer and counsel. Does this

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mean we should neglect our families? No, of course not. However, there are times in ministry when we must sacrifice the needs of our families in order to serve God. Abraham understood this when God called him to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. There is the wonderful promise in Scripture that if we seek first the Kingdom of God, all things will be given to us. (Matthew 6:25-34). However, no such promise is given to those who put family first and God second.

The Battle

In his book, *Citizen Soldiers*, author Stephen Ambrose describes the tragic fate of American troops who were sent to the front lines as replacements during World War II. Untrained in combat, many of them were killed within days. Although they knew how to salute and march in parades, they were unprepared for actual warfare. In the same way, the Christian life is a spiritual battle and we must be ready for battle. The Apostle Paul writes: “Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him.” (2 Timothy 2:3). Like soldiers going into battle, we must put on the full armor of God (Ephesians 6:10-18). The battle is unending and like Timothy, we must bravely endure it. We must view ourselves as conquerors, not as victims (Romans 8:37). To be a pastor is like joining the Navy Seals whose motto is: “The only easy day was yesterday.”

The Mission

In the classic movie, “Twelve O’Clock High,” Gregory Peck plays the commander of an American bomber squadron in World War II. The squadron has lost a lot of pilots and aircraft; morale is low and discipline is lax. Unlike the previous commander who displayed great empathy for his men, Peck’s character — Brig. Gen. Frank Savage — gathers his squadron and gives them a stern lecture:

“I can tell you now one reason I think you’ve been having hard luck. I saw it in your faces last night. I can see it there now. You’ve been looking at a lot of air lately ... and you think you ought to have a rest. In short, you’re sorry for yourselves. I don’t have a lot of patience with this. We’re in a war, a shooting war. We’ve got to fight. And some of us have got to die. I’m not trying to tell you not to be afraid. Fear is normal. But stop worrying about it and about yourselves. Stop making plans. Forget about going home. Consider yourselves already dead. Once you accept that idea, it won’t be so tough.”

This lecture does not endear Savage to his men. In fact, they despise him. And yet, the squadron experiences a dramatic turnaround as they become more resilient, tough, and courageous. Instead of complaining about their hardships, they are focused on their mission.

As Christians, we must focus on our mission, not on our personal problems. John Calvin suffered from crippling health problems most of his life, yet he was a prolific preacher and writer. Charles

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Spurgeon suffered serious bouts of depression, but this did not prevent him from preaching. The great 18th Century missionary, Henry Martyn, did not complain of burnout. Instead, he fervently prayed: “Now let me burn out for God!” If you understand your mission, it will inspire you to endure great hardship. Without a mission, we will sink very quickly into despair and depression.

Squads and Platoons

My father served as a combat infantry sergeant in World War II. He was also a pastor. I remember him telling me, “An army fights in squads and platoons.” From a military standpoint, this is very true. No army sends its soldiers into battle all alone. Instead, you are assigned to a squad or platoon which typically consists of 8 to 12 men. Within a platoon, unbreakable bonds of love and loyalty are forged. Often, a soldier will lay down his own life to save his platoon.

In my own ministry, I rely on two bands of brothers. One is made up of fellow EPC pastors who meet monthly by Zoom. The other is made up of men from the local church that I pastored for 21 years. We meet twice a month for dinner, fellowship, Bible study, and sharing from our lives. Recently, one of the men in my group suffered a major heart attack during our meeting. It was only the intervention of our group — diagnosing the issue and rushing him to the hospital — that saved his life.

In the Book of Acts, the Apostle Paul is attacked by an angry mob in the city of Lystra: “They stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered into the city.” (Acts 14:19-20). Paul was not isolated or alone in ministry; he relied on a band of brothers to lift him up. You see, self-care is actually a misnomer. What we really need is a band of brothers to love and support us.

Pleasing God

It is good to earn the praise and applause of people. The problem, however, is when we crave it. If we make it our goal to please people, we will be no use to the Kingdom of God. What invariably happens is that we will become fearful and timid, afraid of offending people. Instead of preaching the truth of God’s Word, we will end up telling people what they want to hear. Instead of pleasing people, we must make it our goal to please God.

When Jesus says, “Love your enemies,” He assumes we will have them. When Jesus says, “Blessed are you when others revile you, and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you,” (Matthew 5:11) He is describing the reality of gospel ministry. When people despise and speak evil against us, Jesus says we should “rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Matthew 5:12).

The story is told of a young pastor who was just starting out in ministry. Seeking guidance, he went to visit a wise old pastor. Asked for his advice, the older pastor pondered for a long time

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before replying in four words: “*Don’t take it personally!*” When people walk out during your sermon, when they murmur maliciously against you, when they leave the church, it is difficult and painful. And yet, we must not take it personally. As Jesus reminds us, “A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.” (John 15:20).

In a therapeutic age that counsels self-care, the way of Jesus seems daunting if not impossible. And yet, it is the only way we will survive and flourish. To weary, stressed-out disciples, Jesus speaks these words of invitation: “Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30). The rest and relief that we desperately seek is found only by taking on the yoke of Christ.

A Moderator's Meanderings

By Gordon Miller
Moderator, 34th General Assembly

“Meanderings” definition: Rambling or passing from one topic to another.

I hope you find the following collection of articles, quotes, quips, and Scripture to be informative, edifying, and thought-provoking. This information is not as thorough or detailed as the other articles in the Plumb Line. But I hope to stimulate honest and open debate on a variety of topics and challenges facing the church — especially the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. With cultural changes coming at ever-increasing speed, all of us on the Plumb Line Editorial Board desire that believers will stand firm, rooted in Scripture. I pray that you read this content in the spirit intended: love for Christ and for each other.

Note: The views and opinions expressed here are mine alone, and do not necessarily represent the views and opinions of the full Editorial Board of the Plumb Line.

Books You Might Enjoy

In the last edition, we looked at two books you could spend years studying, reflecting on, and rereading (*Temptation and Sin: Works of John Owen* and *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings and Analysis*.) It's time to lighten the load with two easy reads. More pamphlet than book, they are easy reads with important messages. Perfect “books” to buy in bulk and share with your Session, church members, or friends.

The Five Solas

by Michael Horton, Eric Landry, Brannon Ellis, Justin Holcomb, Bob Hiller, and Adriel Sanchez, Sola Media, 2025.

I recently received this book through a free offer from Sola (Sola seems to be the rebranding of or new location for one of my favorites, Modern Reformation. Find at solamedia.org). As one might expect from the title, the authors address the Five Solas of the Reformation. Nothing new here, but it is written in a way that will aid new members of the Reformed faith in getting the basics right. More seasoned members can benefit from this short review of why we are Reformed. Inexpensive gift Teaching Elders could provide for new, or old Ruling Elders.

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The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness: The Path to True Christian Joy
by Timothy Keller, 10 Publishing, last reprint 2019.

If you're saddened by the shallowness of much of the church in America, read this book. Keller addresses factors that negatively impact a believer's walk. He suggests ways a Christian can escape self-centeredness that so plagues the church. If you want members who are focused on Jesus Christ, read this book. It opens the door for truly gospel-humble people to find true joy in our Lord. Change their lives, change the church! I've given away more than one hundred copies of this book. You could do the same!

Articles of Interest

"I Don't Have an LGBTQ Neighbor and Neither Do You"

by Rosaria Butterfield

"Reformation 21" February 12, 2026

<https://reformation21.org/i-dont-have-an-lgbtq-neighbor-and-neither-do-you/>

If you're a Rosaria Butterfield fan, check out the February 12, 2026, reformation21 website. As we have come to expect, Butterfield writes with the clarity that comes from being both a student of Scripture and our current culture. If you want subtlety, you will have come to the wrong place. Recognizing the church is (or should be) at war with a culture which seems intent on opening wide the gates of hell, she cuts through the culture's misuse of "orientation" to bring us back to Scripture's creation account. We must choose. Does God define our identity or do we?

"The Gospel and Identity in Christ"

by David B. Garner

"Westminster Magazine" December 1, 2025

<https://wm.wts.edu/read/the-gospel-and-identity-in-christ>

Professor Garner writes from the perspective of someone familiar with the struggles of the Presbyterian Church in America to deal with the issue of same sex attraction and homosexuality. Garner reminds readers this is a theological debate where Scripture is the final determinator and not modern social constructs. Therefore, we must put the gospel first! He totally rejects the efforts of those to paint opposition to the various social theory proponents as unloving bigots. Speaking the truth in love does not depend on how the hearer feels upon hearing the truth. His short article contains quotable material that drives his points home. Examples:

"If you listen long and hard to those making the case for a Christian version of SSA self-identity, you will wait in vain for a cogent biblical and theological defense."

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“The hellish hegemony of the almighty self has poisoned the air we breathe, and sadly, the theological framework we now inhale and exhale.”

Garner uses Scripture to show how identity is God-made and not man-made, and how important it is to understand creation and “to be in Christ” as a new creation. Our identity is a theological fact not a product of a culture that has lost its way. “Scripture and Scripture’s Christ deliver cosmically-critical, sin-forgiving, freedom-rendering, past-crushing, and utterly-transforming new life and new identity in Christ.” Wow! He ends with a call to the church to stand firm, resting in the life transforming power of Christ.

Quotes

“Be killing sin or sin will be killing you.” —John Owen.

“It takes considerable knowledge just to realize the extent of your own ignorance.” —Thomas Sowell.

“Fools have answers. The wise have questions.” —Unknown.

Humor

“People who think they know everything are a great annoyance to those of us who do.”
(Isaac Asimov)

“A day without sunshine is like, you know, night.” (Steve Martin)

“Between two evils, I always pick the one I never tried before.” (Mae West)

“We are all here on earth to help others; what on earth the others are here for I don’t know.”
(W.H. Auden)

Personal Observations

1. I have had the privilege to associate with people who are smarter than me. Not only within the legal profession, but also within the EPC. If you’re in a similar position, it may be helpful to remember the person you find yourself in disagreement with might be smarter than you. Humility is a virtue.

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2. I have had the privilege to associate with people within the EPC who have done more for the Kingdom than I could ever dream of doing.
3. When I find myself in discussion with a person who is smarter than I am, who has done more for the kingdom than I have, and we agree on three or more important points surrounding our discussion what should I conclude? What if the relationship has hit a few bumps in the road recently? First, I should remember points 1 and 2. Second, I should give great weight to what this person has shared. Third, I should have a degree of confidence in what we have shared. Finally, no matter the bumps, I will recognize that while we might not agree on everything, their love for the EPC may be stronger than mine. As followers of Christ, rare is the occasion we should vilify those we disagree with.

PJC Sustains Complaint Against Presbytery of the Alleghenies

The Presbytery of the Alleghenies acted improperly by not allowing an overture¹ addressing same sex attraction to be considered for a vote, according to a ruling by the Permanent Judicial Commission.

In the January 15 ruling, the PJC sustained in part a complaint brought by New Albany Presbyterian Church (NAPC) in Columbus, Ohio. NAPC elders claimed that their overture was handled “wrongly and improperly” by the Presbytery of the Alleghenies, even though the overture had been ruled in order by the Chief Parliamentarian of the EPC.

The NAPC overture calls for a Constitutional Amendment that would prohibit candidates who identify as homosexual and experience same-sex attraction from being ordained in the EPC. During the November 15 Presbytery meeting, Presbytery officials apparently used a series of procedural maneuvers to prevent the NAPC Overture from being considered for a vote.

In particular, Presbytery officials claimed the overture violated a so-called “gentleman’s agreement” approved by the 44th General Assembly. At that Assembly, commissioners approved the creation of an Ad-Interim Committee on Same-Sex Attraction. As part of that motion, the commissioners expressed their “opinion and wish,” that no action be taken on same sex attraction until the committee completed its report in 2026.

In addition, Presbytery officials included a letter in the meeting packet written by GA Moderator David Strunk and Victor Jones, Chair of the National Leadership Team. The letter cited the “gentleman’s agreement” and urged that no action be taken regarding same sex attraction until the final draft of the Ad-Interim Committee report was acted upon by the 46th General Assembly.

In the end, the Presbytery of the Alleghenies voted 52-31 to deny a first reading of the NAPC overture. In their complaint, the NAPC elders claimed these procedures violated their constitutional right to submit an overture for consideration.

The PJC ruling² acknowledged that the “opinion and wish” of a General Assembly cannot bind or restrict a church from presenting a lawful overture for consideration. The ruling granted relief to the New Albany Church, directing the Presbytery of the Alleghenies to place the overture on its agenda at the February 28 meeting for discussion, debate, and a vote.

TE David Milroy, Pastor of NAPC, said he was hopeful the overture will be approved by the POA and presented to the General Assembly in June.

“No doubt the overture will be controversial, but we can handle that,” said Milroy. “What we cannot abide is a lack of clarity, and this ruling will help achieve that clarity.”

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According to the PJC ruling, the POA wrongfully denied a vote on the overture:

“On these specific facts, this Commission concludes that the overture should have been taken up for consideration. Consequently, this commission sustains in part the Complaint of New Albany Presbyterian Church ... and directs Respondent to place the overture on the agenda for consideration, including opportunity for debate and vote.”

In a concurring opinion, PJC commissioners Zach Hopkins, Gordon Miller, and Donald Flater pointed out the obvious problems if procedure and practice are used to interfere with constitutional rights:

“The controlling issue is not the wisdom of restraint, the desirability of unity, or the prudence of awaiting the report of a denominational study committee. The sole question is one of authority.”

“A Presbytery’s procedural authority over its own docket does not grant discretion to suspend, delay, or nullify the rights of the lower court. A Presbytery may debate an overture, amend, or decline to approve it on its merits. It may not deny a Session access to constitutional process by refusing to receive or consider an overture that is otherwise in order on grounds not found in the Constitution.”

The concurring opinion rejected the idea that the “opinion and wish” of a particular General Assembly could nullify the rights guaranteed in the EPC Constitution.

“If an Assembly’s ‘opinion and wish’ may operate to suspend enumerated rights, then those rights exist only at the pleasure of a majority. Taken together, these issues reveal a single constitutional principle: in our polity, authority flows from text, not from tradition, preference or prudence. Expressed provisions govern. Practices serve rights; they do not defeat them.”

The issue of same sex attraction has generated controversy in the EPC in recent years. The controversy began in 2022 when Greg Johnson, Pastor of Memorial Presbyterian Church in St. Louis, Mo., petitioned to join the EPC. Johnson identifies as a gay Christian and experiences same-sex attraction, although he professes to be celibate. Johnson and his church previously belonged to the Presbyterian Church in America but left that denomination following years of conflict and multiple charges being filed against them.

A draft of the AIC report on same-sex attraction is currently being presented at Presbytery meetings for feedback and discussion. Critics of the report believe it does not resolve the issue, and leaves the door open for the ordination of pastors who identify as homosexual and experience ongoing same-sex attraction.

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The Plumb Line contacted the Presbytery of the Alleghenies for a comment. However, Stated Clerk Dana Opp said he was unable to comment on the PJC ruling without convening a meeting of the POA Leadership Team, which takes a week to 10 days.

¹ See https://presbyterianplumbline.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/PJC_FinalOrderAndOpinion35060139.1.pdf

² See <https://presbyterianplumbline.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/NewAlbanyConstitutional-Amendment.pdf>

Presbyteries Consider Overture on Same Sex Attraction

An overture that seeks to prohibit the ordination of elders who experience ongoing same sex attraction (SSA) has met with mixed results in meetings of EPC presbyteries.

As of February 24, four presbyteries had voted to approve the overture creating a constitutional amendment¹ and three presbyteries voted to not approve the overture for 46th General Assembly consideration in June. One presbytery has yet to vote on the overture.

In each presbytery that considered the overture the debate was described as orderly, cordial, and courteous. Those supporting the overture argued that the 46th General Assembly needed the opportunity to vote to prevent the ordination of those currently experiencing same sex attraction. Those voting against generally did not oppose the content of the overture but argued that the EPC should trust the process and honor the “gentleman’s agreement” of the 44th General Assembly. In addition, it was stated that the EPC should wait until the final report of the Ad Interim Committee is filed before making any response.

Alleghenies and the PJC ruling

On November 15, 2025, the Presbytery of the Alleghenies voted to not include on its docket the overture that was submitted by New Albany EPC of Columbus, Ohio. Alleghenies’ action sparked a complaint by five REs of New Albany to the Permanent Judicial Commission (PJC). On January 15, 2026, the PJC found that Alleghenies had violated New Albany’s right to overture the General Assembly and directed it to vote on the overture at its February meeting, now scheduled for February 28. The PJC also found that the “gentleman’s agreement” and “opinion and wish” of the 44th General Assembly was “not binding” and “not a constitutional basis for exclusion of an otherwise valid overture.”

Presbyteries approving the overture

The Presbytery of the Pacific Northwest voted 65-28 with three abstentions to approve the overture amending the Constitution on January 30. Debate lasted approximately 45 minutes. The Session of ten churches signed on to the petition from the Session of First Presbyterian Church of Jacksonville, Ore., which presented the overture for consideration.

On February 6, New River Presbytery voted 41-33 to approve the constitutional amendment. The overture was presented by Rivermont EPC in Lynchburg, Va.

On February 21, Central Carolinas Presbytery voted to approve the constitutional amendment by a count of 68-39. Seven sessions concurrently presented the overture.

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Also on February 21, the Presbytery of Florida and the Caribbean voted 19-11 in favor of the overture. The Session of GracePoint in Plant City, Fla., brought the overture to the presbytery for consideration.

Presbyteries not approving

On January 24, Gulf South Presbytery voted by a 2-to-1 majority to not approve the overture, which had been submitted for consideration by Grace Presbyterian Church of Alexandria, La.

On January 31, Coastal Mid-Atlantic took up the overture to amend the Constitution. It was presented by the Session of Rockville Presbyterian Church of Wadmalaw Island, S.C., and was voted down 40-26.

On February 7, Midwest Presbytery considered the amendment to the Constitution and voted 57-16 to not approve it.

Due to the deadline that all constitutional amendments must be submitted 60 days before the Assembly convenes, these winter meetings are the latest that constitutional amendments may be approved by a presbytery for General Assembly consideration in June. This 60-day deadline is in place to ensure the Permanent Judicial Commission (PJC) has ample time to consider and evaluate amendments to the Constitution, one of its key responsibilities.

¹ See <https://presbyterianplumbline.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/ConstitutionalAmendment.pdf>

Michigan Church Transfers to PCA

Alarmed by the issue of same-sex attraction, Christ Presbyterian Church in Novi, Mich., voted by an overwhelming majority in December to join the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). Although it is an independent church, the Novi congregation had been in relationship with the EPC since it was chartered in 2006 and had adopted the Westminster Confession, Shorter Catechism, and EPC Book of Order.

That relationship came to an end after the church became concerned that the EPC might ordain homosexual elders who claim to be celibate. The decision to leave the EPC also was influenced by the retirement of TE Jimmy McGuire, who has pastored the Novi church since 2008.

“It’s a tragedy,” said McGuire. “What precipitated it was the lingering question before us of Greg Johnson and the ordination of same sex attracted elders. We could easily have gone into the EPC if that were not the issue but they didn’t want to risk it. With the indecision of the EPC, they were gun-shy about going into the EPC.”

McGuire, 79, served as Moderator of the EPC in 1999. He is scheduled to retire in May 2026 and will remain a part of the EPC. He said the PCA has twice attempted to plant a church in the Novi community without success but has committed to recruiting a pastor/evangelist who will grow and revitalize the congregation by attracting new and younger members. The congregation has declined in recent years from 100 to about 40 active members, due mainly to the COVID pandemic, McGuire said.

Although he will remain part of the EPC, McGuire is concerned by what will happen if the General Assembly votes to approve the ordination of homosexual pastors who claim to be celibate.

“I’m totally against it,” said McGuire. “It is a cultural mandate that has found its way into the church. It is disheartening.”

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“What’s at Stake in the EPC?” #3 Coming March 3

On Tuesday, March 3rd, the Editorial Board of The Presbyterian Plumb Line will host the third installment of its Zoom meeting series “What's at Stake in the EPC?” from 7:00-8:30 p.m. EST.

The members of The Presbyterian Plumb Line Editorial Board will share their thoughts on the current state of the EPC and what’s at stake in the EPC at the General Assembly 2026. Special Guests include TEs Nate Atwood and Jeff Jeremiah.

To register, go to:

<https://us06web.zoom.us/meeting/register/kav1R4N6QA6TCgvXF1PHIQ#/registration>