

PCUSA Moderator Goes Awry in Her Claims of a “Deeply Pernicious Heresy”

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When Rev. Joan Gray was elected Moderator of the PCUSA at the last General Assembly I, as a voting delegate, felt that, though we could have done better (had one of the other candidates been elected), we also could have done far worse (had either of two other “Covenant Network” candidates been chosen). She is certainly a much better moderator than a couple of recent ones. However, recent remarks by Joan Gray should be filed under the “we could have done better” category—unless, of course, she has the courage and humility to acknowledge publicly her error.

Moderator Rev. Joan Gray has declared that anyone who believes that impenitent, homosexually active persons should not be granted church membership is guilty of “a deeply pernicious heresy” (so the title given to an Aug. 4, 2007 editorial in www.presbyweb.com found [here](#)). These are very strong words, which I take to heart since I hold the view to which she is referring. She even goes so far as to cite the apostle Paul in support of her position, claiming that such a view is “a form of works righteousness” that “leads us back into the bondage Paul rails against in Galatians.”

As a scholar of Paul who has worked heavily on sexuality issues for a decade, and is nearly finished a 100+ page annotated translation of Galatians for future publication, I must say that her announcement about Paul in particular and Scripture in general is ‘news to me.’ If there is “a deeply pernicious heresy” here, it is the position that no repetitive, unrepentant behavior *of any sort*, no matter how extreme the departure from Jesus’ teaching, can have any relevance for membership status in the church, much less for inheritance in God’s kingdom.

Rev. Gray’s remarks have prompted me to put on the web a “lost” chapter that I wrote in 1999 for my book *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, entitled “Church Policy as regards Homosexual Practice: Membership and Ordained Ministry” (56 pgs., 36,500 words; <http://robgagnon.net/articles/homosexChurchPolicy.pdf>).

In addition to this chapter, I commend a number of responses that have already appeared as letters in www.presbyweb.com, particularly those by [Winfield Casey Jones](#), [Tom Hobson](#), [Walter Taylor](#), [Will Jackson](#), [Mike Armistead](#), [James Berkley](#) (and in his blog

[here](#)), and [James Tony](#). In response to Rev. Gray, I would make the following points and then refer her to the chapter cited above for more discussion.

1. The early church held minimal standards for repentance as conditions for entry into the faith. They did not expect perfection of life but they did expect some minimal expression of intent to abstain from extreme instances of immorality. The Apostolic Decree insisted on this as regards *porneia*, “sexual immorality,” which, given allusions back to Leviticus 18 and parallel “Noahide” laws in early Judaism, would have highlighted incest (compare 1 Cor 5), adultery (compare 1 Cor 6:9; 1 Thess 4:3-8), same-sex intercourse (compare Rom 1:24-27; 1 Cor 6:9), and bestiality. The same minimal standards existed for economic exploitation of others. Yes, all of us are greedy to some extent but there are some actions that are so extreme in their departure from God’s will as to call into question the genuineness of a claim to repentance. For example, only after the tax collector Zacchaeus announced, “If I defrauded (or: cheated) anyone of anything I (will) give back four times as much,” did Jesus say, “Today salvation has come to this house because he too is a son of Abraham” (Luke 19:8-9). Yes, Jesus reached out to tax collectors and sinners, including sexual sinners, in an effort to reclaim them for the kingdom of God. Yet that is an entirely different matter from asserting that such persons became his followers even as they continued in a self-affirming manner to engage in extremely immoral practices. Jesus was clear: Being his disciple hinged upon a willingness to lose one’s life, take up one’s cross, and deny oneself (Mark 8:34-35). Prior to Jesus John the Baptist had declared to the crowds that before being baptized they should “bear fruits worthy of repentance” (Luke 3:8). For further discussion of the importance of repentance in the early church and minimal expectations thereof, see my Presbyweb Viewpoint, “[Church Membership, Repentance, and the Transformed Life](#)” (July 3, 2006).

Note that Rev. Gray falsely characterizes the position that denies membership to those actively and impenitently engaged in homosexual practice as an insistence on “a way of life that is free of *all* unrepented sin” (my emphasis). Calvin was not expecting perfection when he said: “Those in whom the Spirit does not reign do not belong to Christ; therefore those who serve the flesh are not Christians, for those who separate Christ from His Spirit make Him like a dead image or a corpse. . . . Free remission of sins cannot be separated from the Spirit of regeneration. This would be, as it were, to rend Christ asunder” (*The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians* [Eerdmans, 1961], 164). No, Calvin was expecting some minimal evidence of transformation, which could not be said to exist in the face of continual and self-affirming, gross violations of the will of God.

2. Contrary to what Rev. Gray claims, having minimal expectations for repentance is not the same as promoting “a form of works righteousness,” much less a so-called “‘Jesus and’ heresy.” Conforming to such expectations is in no sense conceived as a meritorious act but rather as an expression of the genuineness of one’s faith in Jesus Christ as Lord. Faith is not mere intellectual assent to the truth. It is reliance

on the saving work of Jesus Christ that leads one to die to self and live for the One who loved us so much that he gave his life for us (Gal 2:19-20). If a serial unrepentant participant in adult incest or adultery or stealing or rape or murder asks to be made a member of the church on the basis of a simple confession of faith in Christ's lordship, the church's response is not: "You must add to your faith meritorious acts of righteousness before you can become a member"; but rather: "Your continuance in such gross violations of Scripture's teaching, indeed your expression of intent to continue in them, indicates that your confession of faith in Christ is not genuine." The church is not saying when it takes such a stance, "*Jesus and something else saves you*"; rather, "Your 'Jesus' is not the true Jesus."

3. While Rev. Gray likens withholding membership to homosexually active persons to the requirement of circumcision placed on Gentile converts by the 'judaizing' Christian missionaries at Galatia, Paul himself would not have done so. Of circumcision Paul is able to say:

If you get circumcised, Christ will be of no help to you. . . . Every man who gets circumcised . . . is a debtor to do the whole law. You were discharged from Christ, you who are trying to be justified by the law. You fell out of grace. For (it is) *we*, (those living) by the Spirit from faith, (who) are awaiting eagerly the hope of receiving a verdict of righteousness (at the end). For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision has any power, nor a foreskin, but (only) faith working through love. (Gal 5:2-6)

An almost identical statement about circumcision appears in 1 Cor 7:19a: "Circumcision is nothing and a foreskin is nothing" (indeed, compare Gal 6:15a: "For neither circumcision is anything nor a foreskin"). Yet in a chapter in 1 Corinthians that continues the discussion of proper *sexual* behavior begun in ch. 5 Paul quickly adds in 1 Cor 7:19b: "but (the) keeping of the commandments of God (is everything; or: is what matters)" (compare Gal 6:15b: "but a new creation [is everything; or: is what matters]"). So too here in Galatians Paul quickly describes who these persons are who live "by the Spirit from faith":

Walk by the Spirit and you will certainly not carry out (the) desire of (the) flesh. . . . If you are being led by the Spirit you are not under (the jurisdiction of) the law. Now the works of the flesh are apparent, which are: sexual immorality (*porneia*), (sexual) impurity (*akatharsia*; a term used of same-sex intercourse in Rom 1:24-27), (sexual) licentiousness (*aselgeia*). . . . and the things like these, (about) which I am telling you beforehand, just as I told (you) beforehand, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. . . . And those who belong to Christ [Jesus] (have) crucified the flesh with its passions and its desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also line up with the Spirit. (Gal 5:16-25)

Note that there is no freedom from the jurisdiction of the law for those who continue to engage in sexual immorality. They remain subject to the law's curse because they continue to live out of the sinful impulses operating in the flesh and the flesh is in the domain of the law. Paul would *never* have said: Sexual immorality is nothing and sexual purity is nothing. Why? Because to engage in

sexual immorality was to put oneself at distinct risk of not inheriting God's eternal kingdom—or so Paul thought, the person to whom Rev. Gray falsely appealed. Paul would *never* have said: If you insist on not engaging in homosexual practice or incest or adultery Christ will be of no help to you; you are discharged from Christ and have fallen out of grace. But he could say that precise thing about those who insisted on circumcision. What's the difference? A life lived in sexually immoral behavior is an indication of the defective, even disingenuous, character of one's faith, whereas the absence of circumcision is no such indication.

The warning in Gal 5:19-21 about not inheriting the kingdom of God if one continues in sexual immorality and other grave offenses sounds remarkably like the warning in 1 Cor 6 which Paul applied in the first instance to the *pornos* or sexually immoral man who called himself a believer but engaged in an act of adult, consensual incest (5:11):

Or do you not know that unrighteous people will not inherit the kingdom of God?
Stop deceiving yourselves: Neither sexually immoral persons (*pornoi*, i.e. like the incestuous man), nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor ‘soft men’ (*malakoi*, i.e. men who feminize themselves to attract male sex partners), nor men who lie with a male (*arsenokoitai*, a term formed from the Levitical prohibition of male homosexual practice) . . . shall inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Cor 6:9-10)

As with the vice list in Gal 5:19-21, special attention is given to sexual offenses and the warning is specifically applied to believers. As with 1 Thess 4:2-8, these warnings were not only issued to converts in the letter at hand but were issued by Paul on previous occasions (1 Cor 5:9). They are warnings that Paul issued to people who called themselves believers in Christ, not to “pagans” whose demise he simply assumed (e.g., 1 Thess 4:13; 1 Cor 11:32). Now according to Rev. Gray this would be a heretical “Jesus and” theology. And yet Paul held it—an apostle who understood more about grace than any of us.

The connections between Galatians and 1 Corinthians—two very different letters, one focusing on Christian freedom, the other focusing on Christian obligation—continue with the line in 1 Cor 6:9: “Stop deceiving yourselves.” The exact same phrase appears in Gal 6:

Stop deceiving yourselves. God is not going to be mocked. . . . For the one who casts seed into his own flesh will, from the flesh, reap destruction. . . . Let us not grow tired (or: discouraged) in doing what is good, for in due time we will reap (eternal life), if we do not give up. (Gal 6:7-9)

What would be ‘deceiving ourselves’? According to Paul it would be thinking that we could get away with sexually immoral practices as “believers” in Christ and still inherit eternal life—in short, the view apparently being espoused by Rev. Gray.

4. In my view Paul would have considered a case of serial, unrepentant ‘committed’ same-sex intercourse as at least as bad, and probably worse, than a case of serial, unrepentant ‘committed’ adult incest (for the arguments, briefly summarized, see Appendix 1, pp. 12-16, of my online article, “[How Bad Is Homosexual Practice According to Scripture?](#)”). It is likely, based on the texts cited above, that Paul would not have accepted as genuine an initial claim to repentance and a confession of Christ’s lordship from someone who did not change his homosexual lifestyle when allegedly moving from paganism to faith in Christ. But if some time had elapsed between conversion and entering into a homosexual life, then, as with the incestuous man Paul would have held open the possibility that the person who is now “inside the church” may be a genuine believer (cf. 1 Cor 5:9-13 and the presumption of the indwelling Christ in the analogy offered in 6:15-17). But if the offender was a genuine believer, then he or she was at serious risk of being “discharged from Christ.” If the offender showed no sign of repentance of sexual immorality—a state that ran a high risk of forfeiting eternal life (2 Cor 12:21)—he would have to be removed from the life of the community until he did repent (1 Cor 5:4-5, 9-13). Otherwise, the corrupting effect of sexual immorality could infect the whole community (5:6-7) and the offender would have no spur to reform and so be saved (5:5). What would Rev. Gray have us do? Make the offenders members and then immediately put them on church discipline, severing contact? Would it not be better to delay membership until the gross sexual immorality is rectified, allowing the offenders observer status for a time in the church to let the gospel have its influence (cf. 1 Cor 14:23-25)? Granting membership status to persons actively engaged in egregious immorality sends the wrong message; namely, that the offense is not significant enough to jeopardize inheritance in God’s eternal kingdom. It is precisely against this erroneous view that Paul repeatedly warned but over which Rev. Gray appears to have little concern.
5. There are at least two areas in Rev. Gray’s argument that she and I have partial, but only partial, agreement. She rejects the notion that “gay and lesbian people . . . can’t be Christians”—I assume she means on the basis of engaging in homosexual behavior since no one is arguing that the mere experience of homosexual urges, without acquiescing to them, is a barrier to fellowship. She is only partially right. As with the case of the self-affirming incestuous man, such persons may or may not be genuine believers. On the one hand, they are engaged in acts serious enough to call into question the genuineness of faith. On the other hand, there are number of places where Paul indicates that once-genuine believers can engage in severe immorality that jeopardizes their inheritance of eternal life (as the above-cited remarks in Galatians and 1 Corinthians indicate, along with other Pauline texts). If they are believers, though, they are believers at heightened risk of exclusion from God’s kingdom. So, again, either they should not be made members or, if already members before entering into such behavior, they should be put on church discipline after a reasonable period of time allotted for repentance.

The second area over which we have partial agreement is her reading of the [1978 General Assembly policy statement on homosexuality](#). On pp. 6-7 of my online article “[Robert Gagnon to Stacy Johnson: Two Positions on Homosexual Practice, Not Six](#),” I wrote: “The 1978 Definitive Guidance (and the PCUSA generally) may have erred in giving a blank membership check to homosexual persons *or any persons* actively engaged in self-affirming, grossly immoral behavior.” (Here I am, confessedly, more critical of the 1978 policy statement than is Jim Berkley in his recent [blog](#).) But I also noted—and now reiterate in disagreement with Rev. Gray’s reading but in agreement with Jim Berkley’s reading—that: “At the same time the Definitive Guidance [since 1993 “Authoritative Interpretation”] should have applied its own logic when it said that ‘As *persons* *repent* and believe, they become members of Christ’s body’ and that PCUSA membership entails ‘honest affirmation to the vows. . . . ‘Jesus Christ is my *lord* . . . ’ and ‘I intend to be *his disciple, to obey his word*. . . .’” Moreover: “even the 1978 Definitive Guidance does not preclude the administration of church discipline on members who persist in committing self-affirming violations of minimal standards for purity and holiness in the church.” So there is confusion and tension within the 1978 policy.

6. I strongly disagree with Rev. Gray’s interpretation of G-5.0103. G-5.0103 states:

The congregation shall welcome all persons who respond in trust *and obedience* to God’s grace in Jesus Christ and desire to become part of the membership and ministry of his Church. No persons shall be denied membership because of race, ethnic origin, worldly condition, or any other reason not related to profession of faith (my emphasis).

Rev. Gray interprets this to mean: “Our *Book of Order* makes a profession of faith in Jesus Christ the only requirement for church membership. Refusing people membership in the church for reasons not related to profession of faith in Jesus as savior is forbidden by the constitution of the church.” In other words she apparently understands serial, unrepentant immorality of an egregious sort (which is what homosexual practice is) as ‘not related to profession of faith in Jesus as savior.’ However, as I noted last year (see also [Winfield Casey Jones](#)’ recent response to Gray) in “[Church Membership, Repentance, and the Transformed Life](#)”: “This provision states clearly that those who are welcomed into church membership are ‘all persons who respond in trust *and obedience* to God’s grace.’ There is nothing in the following sentence that would preclude denial of membership based on continued disobedience to minimal standards for obedience to the gospel.” “Race, ethnic origin, worldly condition” are all inherently benign conditions void of any immoral element. Engaging in homosexual practice, incest, adultery, and the like are not benign conditions that are unrelated to profession of faith. This should be obvious to all, not just our Moderator. [James Tony](#) makes a similar case from the Book of Common Worship.

7. Rev. Gray states: “Yes, being in a saving relationship with our Lord does require us to live a holy life. The fact that we have significant differences about what a holy life entails, however, does not entitle some of us to lock others of us out of the body of Christ.” I am glad that Rev. Gray acknowledges that a holy life is a

‘requirement’ for being and continuing in a saving relationship with our Lord. But this acknowledgement contradicts her assertion, noted in point 7 above, that self-affirmed immoral behavior even of an extreme sort is “not related to profession of faith in Jesus as savior.” I hope that Rev. Gray is not using “requirement” in the same double-speak manner taken on by the Task Force on “Peace, Unity, Purity”; namely, that a holy life is not an ‘essential’ requirement. “The fact that some people “have significant differences about what a holy life entails” is irrelevant. Scripture clearly assesses adult consensual homosexual practice as immoral sexual behavior on a par with, or worse than, adult consensual incest. The A.I. first formulated in 1978 also declares homosexual practice of every and any sort to be incompatible with a holy life. Nor is the church “locking [anyone] out of the body of Christ.” It is rather trying to insure that individuals will *not* be locked out of the true body of Christ through a life of self-deception (much like Paul’s handling of the incestuous man). It is the unrepentant immoral activity that locks a person out of the body of Christ, or threatens to do so, in the deepest sense of “the body of Christ.”

8. Rev. Gray’s final example on not judging (i.e. the monk carrying a leaky bag of sand) is distressing. It takes no account of how serious a given sin is, nor of whether the sin in question is repetitive, nor of whether it continues to be affirmed by the offender, nor of what harm is being done to the church body, nor of the offender’s eternal destiny if strong action is not taken. It takes no account of Paul’s exasperated word to the Corinthians in the case of the incestuous man: “Aren’t you (the church) to judge those inside (the church)” since they profess to be under Christ’s lordship? Rev. Gray has answered “No” and declared “Yes” to be a “deeply pernicious heresy.” She has given the incorrect answer.

In conclusion I grieve over the deeply pernicious heresy that some in our church have when they claim that regularly engaging in immoral behavior of an extreme sort and in a self-affirming manner is no bar to membership in our denomination.

I close with two points that I made in my article “[Church Membership, Repentance, and the Transformed Life](#)”: First, the church should be generous in its acceptance of the genuineness of claims to repentance by offenders, give reasonable opportunity for the offender to be exposed to the gracious demand of the gospel, and take action only in cases that are particularly egregious, serial, and unrepentant. Second, a church that disconnects completely membership requirements and minimal expectations for a holy life is a church that is deficient in both love of offenders and reverential fear of God. The church of today does not love more, or better, nor is it more “pastoral,” than our Lord, the apostle Paul, or the rest of the New Testament witness.