

What the Lordship of Christ and the Authority of Scripture

Mean for Christian Sexual Standards

By George V. Campbell, Th.M., Ph.D.

A Christian is someone who has a relationship with God by faith in Jesus Christ. That relationship begins when someone acknowledges that they have sinned, falling short of God's perfect goodness, accepts that on the cross Jesus took responsibility for their sins and endured the just punishment that a holy God demanded for their wrongs, and believes that what Christ did satisfied God's demands against them. Saving faith says, "God holds nothing against me now because Christ satisfied my debt. Jesus saved me from God's wrath" (See John 3:16; Romans 3:21-25). Believers begin to grow in love for God and enter lifelong service to bring glory to God by proclaiming the Gospel and modeling God's Kingdom.

To *become* a Christian is to *believe* Jesus; to *live* as a Christian is to *obey* Jesus (Matthew 28:20). Faith *requires* obedience to Jesus as fire produces smoke. That's because believing in Jesus means believing who He claimed to be: Immanuel, "God with us" (Matthew 1:23). And by definition, God is to be obeyed. Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 7:21). James reiterated it: "faith without works is dead" (James 2:26). John Calvin said it this way: we are saved by faith alone but not by a faith that remains alone. "You will recognize them by their fruits" (Matthew 7:16, 20). Being a Christian *means* living under the Lordship of Jesus Christ: *believing* He is Lord (i.e., God) and one's savior and *obeying* Him as Lord. Since the Bible is our only infallible source of Jesus' teaching, living under the Lordship of Christ *means* living under the Authority of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16-17; Matthew 4:4; John 10:35; *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, Ch. 1).

The Lordship of Christ has often been misrepresented as a list of prohibitions. While it is true that God deserves obedience from everyone because He is God, this is not how Scripture typically presents it. The pervasive Biblical analogy is a love relationship: God's demands are motivated by love and are obeyed out of love. This perspective characterizes the grand Biblical summary of ethics, the Ten Commandments. Deuteronomy 5:6 grounds the Commandments in God's love and goodness: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." The benefit of obedience is this: "Hear therefore, O Israel, and be careful to do them, *that it may go well with you*" (Deuteronomy 6:3). Then follows Israel's famous *Shema*, stated in love-language, which was unprecedented in a document of this sort: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." Hence Jesus' summary of Biblical ethics: "Love the Lord. . . and love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:28-31). Living in a love relationship is typically like Cinderella: the thrill of being loved and married by the Prince makes living as his bride a joy and a delight. Jesus said, "my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:30).

The Lordship of Christ affects every aspect of life, as the Ten Commandments (not the "Ten Suggestions") exemplify. The first four commands (Deuteronomy 5:6-15) demand that our speech, actions, and possessions be used to honor God. The last six commands (Deuteronomy 5:15-21) instruct believers to seek the well-being of their neighbor. From these derive a comprehensive array of expectations (elaborated in Deuteronomy 6-25) that establish many of the West's foundational ethical commitments, such as honesty, caring for the poor, respecting the boundaries that protect others, and working for the common good.¹

¹ See the author's *Christian Behavior: A Primer Based on the Ten Commandments* (available upon request from the author).

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Submitting to the Christ's Lordship is sometimes difficult: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). It would be far easier if Jesus did not require us to forgive our enemies, to overcome social distinctions within the church, to live lives of self-discipline, to daily confess and repent of self-indulgence, greed, and hypocrisy, and to examine and judge every aspect of our culture in the light of Scripture (e.g., Galatians 5:19-21). The challenge of following Christ means that the Christian's primary preoccupation is always on his/her own obedience, rather than castigating others (Matthew 7:3-5). Failing here undoes our ability to honor God and share the Gospel with others.

Sexual behavior is not exempted from Christ's Lordship, and Scripture limits sexual activity to marriage. Deuteronomy 5:18, says, "You shall not commit adultery." Paul writes of the effect of following Christ: "Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:9-11). Augustine turned from extra-marital sexual activity (see his *Confessions*), Paul called the Corinthian Christians to stop several sorts of sexually immoral practices, and many Christians in history have abandoned polygamy to obey Christ.

In June, 2011, the Presbyterian Church (USA) passed Amendment 10-A, which eliminated all sexual requirements regarding ordination. This means that sexual activity before marriage, adultery while married, homosexual activity, bestiality (sex with animals) or any other sexual activity no longer bars a candidate from ordination in the Presbyterian Church (USA). The new ordination standards are a denial of the Lordship of Christ and the Authority of Scripture since each of these is prohibited by Scripture. It is true that the new standards allow local bodies to do what the denomination no longer mandates: they may refuse ordination to a candidate on sexual grounds *if they wish*. But this too is a denial of the Lordship of Christ and the Authority of Scripture since the Scriptural prohibitions of these sexually immoral behaviors are not optional but are matters of sin. Many have been most conscious that the new standards clear the way for the ordination of practicing gays and lesbians. This is true, and justifies what Scripture condemns in strong language, calling it an "abomination" (Leviticus 18:22; see also Romans 1:26-27). In American culture, this is the widespread sexual activity that most offends traditional cultural sensibilities. But because Americans have become accustomed to many sexual activities among heterosexuals that the Bible also condemns, such as premarital sex, many will fail to recognize that the more radical feature of the new standards is removing sexual conduct as such from requirements for ordination. The Presbyterian Church (USA) has effectively declared sexual conduct exempt from the Lordship of Christ and the Authority of Scripture.

Opposition to the new ordination standards is not derived from hatred of gays or lesbians, who Christians are called to love, nor from "homophobia," nor from culturally-conditioned aversion to GLBT practice. It is based upon commitment to the Lordship of Christ and the Authority of Scripture. It is no more and no less than that.

How could a Christian denomination come to endorse what Scripture condemns? A few briefly elaborated observations must suffice. First, the ever-present sin in every human heart is a constant source of temptation "to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season" (Hebrews 11:25), as King David's life powerfully illustrates. Equally important is the power of our culture to mold us, so that we come to

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accept as “obvious” the standards and attitudes of our culture. The ever-relevant admonition of Scripture is “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Romans 12:2). Next, but related, American culture in the last century has largely abandoned its traditional commitment to self-control, traditionally expressed preeminently in sexual self-control, and replaced it with self-expression. This has coincided with a gradual shift toward valuing individual happiness over social obligations.² Thus the sexual self-control which past generations saw as healthy for society is now perceived by Americans (and Europeans) as a puritanical intrusion upon personal liberty, with little regard being given to social consequences.³ Fourth, theological liberalism, which arose in the 19th century, prides itself on “accommodation” to the world based upon the assumption that Christianity will die unless it conforms to current culture.⁴ But this vainly tries to avoid the “offense of the cross” (Galatians 5:11), flatly defies Romans 12:2 (“do not be conformed to this world”), and has in fact produced dramatic numerical decline in those denominations that have adopted it, including the Presbyterian Church (USA).⁵ Fifth, the Christian intellectuals who led the movement to abolish sexual requirements for ordination have absorbed liberal elite culture. Sociologist Peter Berger explains that there is “an exchange of authorities: the authority of modern thought or consciousness is substituted for the authority of tradition, the *Deus dixit* [“God says”] of old replaced by an equally insistent *Homo modernus dixit* [“modern man says”]. In other words, modern consciousness and its alleged categories become the only criteria of validity for religious reflection.”⁶ All five of these factors constitute a denial of the Lordship of Christ and the Authority of Scripture, conformity to this world rather than conformity to Christ. And they all torpedo the ability of Christians to proclaim the Gospel and model the Kingdom of God.

But the ultimate cause when the Church is weak is always the same: disobedience to God. Unless carefully schooled in Scripture, Christians inevitably think like their culture and are blind to God’s perspectives, and merit Isaiah’s indictment: “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil . . . for they have rejected the law of the LORD of hosts, and have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel . . . Therefore the anger of the LORD was kindled against his people.” (Isaiah 5:20, 24, 25). God demands holiness of His people: “come out from among them and be ye separate” (2 Corinthians 6:17).

The new ordination standards of the Presbyterian Church (USA) deny the Lordship of Christ and the Authority of Scripture, and hinder proclaiming the Gospel and modeling the Kingdom of God. As Jesus framed it, “for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God” (Matthew 15:6). Jesus’ question is still chilling: “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you?” (Luke 4:46).

² See, for example, Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (University of Chicago Press, 1966).

³ See psychologist Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *The Divorce Culture* (Random House, 1997).

⁴ See the case by liberal Protestant William R. Hutchison, *The modernist impulse in American Protestantism* (Harvard University Press, 1979).

⁵ See liberal Protestant Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches are Growing* (Harper & Row, 1972).

⁶ Peter L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative* (Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1979), p. 62.