

**SPECIAL COMMITTEE RE OVERTURE NOS. 11 AND 13, 2005** (cont'd from p. 37)

The report of the Special Committee ~~was presented as follows:~~

We on the Special Committee celebrate the care, respect and sense of community among the members of this committee who have been asked to reflect on the complex and difficult matters regarding same-sex marriage raised in Overture No. 11 and Overture No. 13. The faithful

members of this committee hold various views on these matters and may well reflect the diversity of opinion within the church.

Re Overture No.11, 2005 (p. 581-82)

Overture No. 11 asks the 131st General Assembly “to make a public statement expressing its opposition to the legislation proposed by the federal government ...”. The committee appreciates that this is a time sensitive issue as the proposed federal legislation could be passed into law some time in June. The Special Committee has had no time to read or study Bill C-38. The committee feels it is inappropriate to recommend to the General Assembly a motion that expresses opposition to a specific piece of legislation that has not been reviewed.

The committee does, however, maintain that it is important for the General Assembly to declare what The Presbyterian Church in Canada believes to be the definition of marriage. According to Living Faith, one of the Subordinate Standards of the church, “Christian marriage is a union in Christ whereby a man and a woman become one in the sight of God” (8.2.3). This public statement makes clear what The Presbyterian Church in Canada holds to be true regarding marriage.

**Recommendation No. 1** was moved by J.R. Bannerman, duly seconded, that the above statement be the response to Overture No. 11, 2005.

**Amendment**

J.T. Hurd moved, duly seconded, that the words “above statement” be deleted and in their place be inserted the following:

That the 131st General Assembly, on the basis of the biblical witness and the confessional standards of The Presbyterian Church in Canada which sets forth the God-given design of marriage as the union of one man and one woman, call upon the Government of Canada to cease from attempts to redefine marriage and, rather, affirm marriage as being the union of one man and one woman.

**Immediate Vote**

After debate, J.G. Davidson moved, duly seconded, that an immediate vote be taken. Adopted.

The amendment was defeated.

**Motion to Refer**

I.B. Cunningham moved, duly seconded, that Recommendation No. 1 be referred back to the Special Committee so that they may read and study the legislation proposed by the Federal Government and recommend a public statement concerning it, and that they report back to this Assembly no later than the Friday morning sederunt. Defeated.

**Amendment**

D.H. Forget moved, duly seconded, that the 131st General Assembly, on the basis of its subordinate standards, reaffirm that marriage is the union of a man and a woman and that The Presbyterian Church in Canada inform the Government of Canada on this matter. Adopted.

**Recommendation No. 1**, as amended, was adopted as follows:

That the 131st General Assembly, on the basis of its subordinate standards, reaffirm that marriage is the union of a man and a woman and that The Presbyterian Church in Canada inform the Government of Canada on this matter.

**Dissent**

A.C. Lane with reasons given as follows:

I am in agreement with the idea that Christian marriage is between a man and a woman, and yet I find myself having in good conscience to dissent from a statement of our church affirming this position. Although my belief follows that of the majority, I find myself speaking up for the rights of the minority to continue to be heard, to continue to be allowed to make their case, to continue to insist that the church seek the fullest witness of the Bible on the whole of God’s counsel. I am concerned that the actions of Assembly will serve to cut off debate and to stifle dissent.

The debate on a previous amendment which explicitly claimed a clear and unambiguous biblical basis for what I take to be the eventual position of Assembly showed the diversity

of opinion within the Assembly and reflected the difficulty of weighing the various biblical witnesses. This amendment was defeated.

I believe that many commissioners felt that they were avoiding the issue of claiming complete and clear biblical authority on this issue by agreeing to this amended version of Assembly's response since it mentions only the subordinate standards of the church and does not mention the Bible explicitly. But what are the subordinate standards but summaries and interpretations of the Bible's witness? I have no doubt that this response will be cited, as its authors clearly intend it to be cited, as the Assembly's interpretation of the biblical witness and that this will have a chilling effect on debate. I assume that this is what the authors of the amended response intended.

Yet I cannot be so confident of my own position that I wish it to triumph unreservedly. I cannot be so certain that I am the people and wisdom will die with me as to be able to wish that others may not speak to try to change my mind. I desire that others may continue to feel free to draw attention to other parts of the biblical witness and to other relevant information that may guide my interpretation of the biblical text and thus cause me to rethink, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, my position. I feel this way because in the history of the church there have been many who have been convinced of the rightness of their biblical interpretation and the moral rightness of their position who, in our eyes, were honestly mistaken. One can cite the support of some theologians for the continued legitimacy of slavery or, more recently, apartheid on a biblical basis. One can think of the denial of the humanity of some races by theologians who denied they had souls, again citing the Bible. One can mention the demonization of aboriginal culture for which we have been apologizing at this Assembly by Christians of good conscience attempting to act out their understanding of biblical teaching. With the knowledge of the mistakes of previous generations, it is difficult to be quite as certain of one's own position on such a difficult issue. As a further warning sign, much of Canada sees the issue of same-sex marriage as a human rights issue and it would be an unreflective person indeed who was not given pause by this conviction to consider whether our moral certainties may turn out to be tomorrow's moral outrages. In order to avoid this unhappy result for the church, I think it is necessary to continue dialogue within the church and with our society. I believe that our response to Overture 11 will result in the stifling of this necessary dialogue and therefore I am recording my dissent.

D.L. Dewolfe with reasons given as follows:

I hereby register my dissent from Assembly's action in adopting the amended Rec. No. 1. I believe the Special Committee did its work with diligence and fairness representing the diversity of opinion in The Presbyterian Church in Canada on the definition of marriage, the legality of same-sex unions, the interpretation of scripture, and the authority of the subordinate standards. The amendment which replaces the committee's recommendation does not reflect this awareness and imposes a Biblical confessional interpretation on a church that is not of one mind. I believe that the Special Committee's original motion affirming the church's present position without elaboration is sufficient. Representation to the government at this date is no longer timely. The challenge now before the church is to find ways to live faithfully in a society that embraces a variety of models of relationship and family. Same-sex marriage is a legal inevitability. Statements of the nature of the response described by the amended recommendation impose premature closure on dialogue, and confirm the exclusion of homosexual persons who live faithfully in relationship from full community in the church.

**The Moderator left the chair**

The Moderator asked R.W. Fee to assume the chair.

Re Overture No. 13, 2005 (p. 582-83)

The committee recognizes the significant changes in Canada in recent months and years as same-sex marriage has become a reality in parts of Canada. These realities need to be considered, discussed, and reflected on biblically and theologically. Reformed and reforming, the church seeks to discern the guidance of the Holy Spirit speaking in scripture. Furthermore, ministers, sessions and presbyteries would benefit from direction and guidance when dealing with requests for ministers to officiate at same-sex weddings.