

Arguments Against the Proposals in Overtures 23 and 37

Kyle Keating

First, I would simply say that both overtures 23 and 37 are unnecessary because the BCO already has instructions for both the qualifications for ordination and examining candidates for ordination that consider concerns about character and conduct. The BCO instructs the lower courts to apply the biblical standards for ordination in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-9. Should a court manifestly fail to do so, there is already recourse in the BCO to redress such cases. The AIC Report on Human Sexuality provides both clarity and consensus guidance for how presbyteries should consider these matters. However, if the denomination still feels burdened to offer further clarifications in our BCO, we can do better than the current language of both 23 and 37.

With respect to overture 23, though I appreciate the hard work the overtures committee put into amending it as well as their intention behind it, I ultimately find it unsatisfactory for several reasons. The parenthetical insertion regarding terminology (“those who profess an identity (such as, but not limited to, ‘gay Christian,’ ‘same sex attracted Christian,’ ‘homosexual Christian,’ or like terms)”) essentially codifies the language of expressive individualism in the BCO, unnecessarily singles out people who experience same-sex attraction, and evidences little understanding of the important contrasts between terms like “gay” and “same-sex attracted” which the AIC report carefully addressed. It also runs the risk of treating terminology as a sort of shibboleth, something which the AIC report suggested we ought to avoid—will we need to continue to amend the BCO for whatever label appears next in our cultural vernacular? Finally, there are multiple different readings of the overture based on how one understands the grammar: Is the threefold test at the end what determines whether one has “professed an identity that undermines or contradicts their new identity in Christ”? Or is simply using the terms in the parenthetical sufficient evidence? Arguments have been made both directions, and this overture seems destined to produce further division among the presbyteries as different presbyteries read and apply it in different ways. We can produce something more clear and more aligned with the AIC report than the current version of overture 23.

Overture 37 has much in its content to commend it, however as explained in the minority report, it has at least one major fatal flaw. The phrase “known by reputation or self-profession according to his remaining sinfulness” creates an unclear standard for candidates for ordination. If other men who experience ongoing same-sex attraction like Ruling Elder Jim Pocta or myself (both members of the AIC) were seeking ordination in the PCA, could they not be known by reputation according to their experience of same-sex attraction? If the language here is not intended to apply to such candidates, what in the language prevents it from doing so? I would simply affirm the minority report’s argument that:

“The ambiguous language of “self-profession” in Overture 37 is open to plausible interpretations that run counter to the wise and clear counsel of the Ad Interim Committee. Further, the imprecision of the Overture ensures that, rather than resolving

current questions, adoption of the Overture would only provoke endless debate over intended meaning.”

There are plausible interpretations of 37 that run counter to the AIC report’s argument that, “Insofar as such persons display the requisite Christian maturity, we do not consider this sin struggle automatically to disqualify someone from leadership in the church” (p.31). Again, we can produce something more clear and more aligned with the AIC report than the current version of overture 37.