**Facebook Post written by Rev. Wilkinson on Sept 3, 2023**

**Rev. Mike Wilkinson**

I want to begin by apologizing for the length of this post dealing with the constitutional amendments that are now before us. I tried to be brief, but was unsuccessful; nonetheless, please read to the end.

I want to say that I did not want to write this post or any post dealing with the amendments and have resisted doing so over the last few days. That all changed early this morning (Sunday, September 3rd) as the Lord woke me up and impressed upon my heart to write. Then while I was at church this morning, a Cumberland Presbyterian minister who is a faithful part of our congregation told me that I must write. She did not know about the Lord’s impression on my heart, so I took that as confirmation; hence, I have returned to the church this afternoon to write this post. In addition to serving as the Pastor of Knoxville First Cumberland Presbyterian Church (Presbytery of East Tennessee) for the last ten years, I am the immediate former Moderator of the General Assembly. I also serve on our denominational Ministry Council which oversees the production of the Cumberland Presbyterian magazine.

I was taught in seminary (Memphis Theological Seminary) that to interpret Scripture and preach with integrity, I must first acknowledge my biases, so here I go: I believe that “The scriptures are the infallible rule of faith and practice, the authoritative guide for Christian living.” [COF, 103] I further believe that the best a way to understand a particular scripture or set of scriptures is to compare it/them to other scriptures. In my life, this plays out in the fact that for my understanding of Scripture to change from the Church’s historical understanding of its meaning (i.e., homosexuality is a sin) to a different understanding requires clear and abundant scriptural testimony.

From the moment I first read Arkansas Presbytery’s Memorial that the 191st General Assembly eventually sent to the Joint Committee on Amendments, I agreed with its intent and language, yet not once in the year that I served as Moderator of General Assembly did I make a public statement expressing my thoughts on this issue. Instead, when asked, I explained how the amendment process worked. My role as Moderator was simply to peacefully guide us through the discussion surrounding an issue that had consistently come before General Assembly over several years. Rightly or wrongly, many times over the years this issue had been shut down via a parliamentary decision.

My intent during both of the latest General Assemblies was simply for the commissioners to have the opportunity to vote. This happened. I publicly shared with the 191st General Assembly that our youngest daughter had within the previous year come out as queer (her preferred term). Last October, she married another woman. I say that to say that I understand and have experienced the pain this particular issue has caused and is causing many families. Once my daughter came out, I dedicated countless hours to studying Scripture looking for a way to change my understanding. Even with the help of those who hold the opposite view of mine, I was unsuccessful; I simply was unable to do the “theological gymnastics” required to agree that homosexuality is not a sin. Nonetheless, I still love my daughter with all my heart, and she does not

doubt that and loves me as well.

In spite of just sharing that I agree theologically with the amendments, I arrived at the 192nd General Assembly fulling committed to insuring the commissioners got to vote on them; I, to the disappointment of my wife and surprise of many of my friends, was planning to vote no. I was, apparently foolishly, hoping that somehow, some way, a less divisive compromise could be reached for the good of the whole Church. I did not want our presbyteries and even some of our congregation fighting over this issue; I admit that was Pollyannaish, but it was my sincere hope. Then on Tuesday morning, five commissioners presented what I consider to be radical resolutions promoting homosexuality within the Church. One of the resolutions was eventually withdrawn and the others voted down on Thursday; nonetheless, I became convinced that compromise was not possible, so when the paper-ballot vote was taken, I voted in favor of sending the amendments to our presbyteries. The 75% majority was reached by one vote and my guess is that I am not the only one to change his or her mind in response to the resolutions.

Getting the amendments to floor to discuss sending them to the presbyteries proved to be difficult as the Joint Committee on Amendments could not reach consensus in its March 2023 meeting. This resulted in a lot of accusations made against certain denominational leaders and committee members. While I was still moderating last year, a motion to set aside a standing rule that all reports must go to a General Assembly committee passed by the required two-thirds vote and the Joint Committee was instructed to meet via Zoom or otherwise and report back on Thursday. On motion, both I and our newly elected Moderator were a part of the meeting. Those who had been accused of parliamentary shenanigans were instrumental in getting the amendments out of Joint Committee so that commissioners could rightfully vote on them. Several weeks ago, I was approached about meeting with at least two other former Moderators to draft a letter to the church urging presbyters to vote no on the amendments. My schedule would not allow me to meet with them; in addition, I was unwilling to sign a letter asking anyone to vote either way. My position was that I spoke my mind at General Assembly and will do so when the amendments are before the Presbytery of East Tennessee; to me, these are the appropriate avenues for me to address the issue, but that is a personal conviction, not a rule. When my presbytery discusses the amendments, I will attempt to explain my position, but will not urge anyone to vote against their conscience. I have full confidence that God will speak clearly to those who seek His counsel on this or any other issue.

After the letter from our former Moderators was written, I was given the opportunity to sign it or to suggest edits that would allow me to sign it. Unfortunately, our difference of opinion and approach were so different that I could make no helpful edits. I would have gladly signed a letter asking everyone to pray diligently before deciding how to vote, but again, I was uncomfortable telling anyone how to vote. I did warn that distributing the letter as written could very well work the way the resolutions worked on me, causing some to change their vote to a yes. Other living former Moderators were then asked to sign the letter and thirteen did so. My assumption is that all nineteen living former Moderators were asked to sign, as well. Why others declined, if asked, is up to them to clarify. One a side note, I have no plans to asked them to draft and/or sign a letter on this issue.

Matt Gore and Michael Sharpe have both taken some criticism for sharing the letter with the Church-at-large. Personally, I think that criticism is unfair. The Editor of the Cumberland Presbyterian magazine received a letter signed by thirteen former General Assembly Moderators and was asked to publish it. In keeping with our standing policy for printing Letters to the Editor, Matt did so. I have known and loved Matt for years and I am confident that the content of the letter was not relevant to Matt’s decision. In my opinion, just the fact that thirteen former Moderators agreed on anything makes it newsworthy. As to our denominational Stated Clerk sending the letter on to our presbyterial Stated Clerks when requested to do so, that is simply a routine part of his job; I have also known and loved Michael for years and am convinced that His personal opinion on the amendments were not relevant to the duties of his office. By the way, I do not know either Matt Gore’s or Michael Sharpe’s position on the amendments because I have never asked them. I have rambled on way to long, so I thank you for reading this post written by someone with inside information to most of the events surrounding two General Assemblies dealing with the constitutional amendments and I want to urge you to pray that God’s will be done in this and all matters of the Church.