

Talking Points

How Maintaining the Church's Current Fidelity and Chastity Standards for Officers in the Current G-6.0106b is Crucial for the Church

Current wording in Book of Order G-6.0106b:

Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman (W-4.9001), or chastity in singleness. Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as deacons, elders, or ministers of the Word and Sacrament.

Proposed replacement wording:

Members who are called to ordained service in the church (G-5.0202), by their assent to the constitutional questions for ordination and installation (G-14.0240, G-14.0450, and W-4.4003), pledge themselves to live lives obedient to Jesus Christ the Head of the Church (G-1.0100), striving to follow where he leads through the witness of scripture (G-14.0801g (3 and 4)). In so doing, they declare their fidelity to the standards of the church.

The proposed amendment would replace the specific wording currently in G-6.0106b with ambiguous, meaningless wording, thereby removing from the *Book of Order* all standards for sexual behavior from the requirements of ministers, elders and deacons. However, sexual expression is a central issue in the way we live out our faith. To confess that Jesus Christ is Lord means that we allow every area of our lives to be ordered by Scripture, including our sexuality. Our current ordination standards are the church bearing witness to the truth revealed in Scripture and expressed by our Confessions.

The Church's witness is that when a Christian professes faith in Christ as Lord and Savior, that faith is confirmed in the Holy Spirit's work to produce a repentant and transformed life. Jesus told his disciples, "If you love me, you will obey what I command" (John 14:15). While all Christians are called to live as instructed by Scripture, leaders are given a special calling to exemplify faith through holy lives, obedient to God's Word. Our ordination standards reflect the high calling of leaders in the church to live as "examples to the flock" (I Peter 5:3). The standards for officers call to mind the blessing of obedience, the incomparable power of God at work in our lives, and the calling to minister the same grace and reconciliation to all.

The standards unify us with the Church around the world and throughout history.

In every generation and throughout the world, church leaders and theologians have consistently and repeatedly affirmed the biblical teaching and the church's historic witness that God's design is for sexual intimacy to be confined to the marriage of a man and a woman. Scripture, our Confessions and the historic witness of the church have been clear that God's gift of sexual expression is to be limited to marriage. The current wording of G-6.0106b in the *Book of Order* makes explicit what has been understood at all times and in every place in the Christian Church.

The current fidelity and chastity ordination standard in G-6.0106b is Presbyterian polity at its best in response to controversy. It is the right decision.

The Church has faced many controversies on important matters throughout its history and has always acted to resolve significant controversies in order to avoid wavering between two opinions. It is unfaithful for the church to make a division permanent by accepting contrary lifestyles involving a critical matter of faith. Historically the church's method of resolving

controversies has been a thorough examination of Scripture. Challenges to the biblical, historical sexual standards for church officers have been before this denomination for more than 30 years. Governing bodies have taken numerous opportunities to examine and re-examine Scripture. Our Confessions, which church officers affirm in their essential tenets to be “reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and to do” speak with one voice on this matter. Each time our church has considered requirements for officers, our church has come to the same conclusion as those in previous generations: that sexual intimacy is to be confined to the marriage of a man and a woman. In 1997 our church stood against the culture and stated explicitly in our polity what it had always held to be taught by Scripture and our Confessions by placing G-6.0106b in our *Book of Order*. The current standards are the way our church says that we will do in our behavior what we say we believe.

The current standards of sexual behavior honor the Lordship of Christ.

Our Constitution in both the *Book of Confessions* and *Book of Order* affirms that, “God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his Word...” (Westminster Confession of Faith, 6.109) The only rival to God as Lord of our conscience is that we become lords of our own consciences. When we confess that God alone is Lord of our conscience, we are confessing that we are not lords of our own consciences, free to determine right living for ourselves. Rather, we are committed to God’s rule in our lives through his Word. The Church has affirmed what God’s Word clearly speaks and we are called to allow the Holy Spirit to shape our consciences so that we desire to live repentant lives. The corporate conscience of the church, bound by God’s Word in Scripture, is set forth in our theology (*Book of Confessions*), and becomes the rule of our corporate life in our polity (*Book of Order*).

The current standards for sexual behavior call the church to ministries of reconciliation

God promises true peace when there is first reconciliation with God through Christ. That reconciliation and peace must be the gracious word of the church to all people. We are called to welcome those who are struggling with sexual conflict and gently urge them toward the throne of God where they can find forgiveness, healing, and peace.

Arguments and Responses

Current G-6.0106b: “Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman (W-4.9001), or chastity in singleness. Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as deacons, elders, or ministers of the Word and Sacrament.”

“Those who are called to office...”

1. Doesn’t the current G-6.0106b set a standard that violates the consciences of some Presbyterians?

The intent of G-6.0106b is to protect true Christian liberty by raising up biblical standards that constrain the consciences of leaders, whose speech and practices are meant to model the Christian life for the world and for the people of God. In this case, the conscience that is perceived to be violated is in need of Christian ministry to prompt it gently toward repentance and renewal in Christ.

The Confessions uniformly reflect the biblical witness that sexual expression is to be limited to the marriage of a man and a woman. When individuals accept ordained leadership, they agree to limits on their freedom of conscience:

It is to be recognized, however, that in becoming a candidate or officer of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) one chooses to exercise freedom of conscience within certain bounds. His or her conscience is captive to the Word of God as interpreted in the standards of the church so long as he or she continues to seek or hold office in that body. . . (G-6.0108b)

4. Isn't ordination a right of every baptized church member?

Baptism is a "sign and seal of the covenant of grace." It is not a call to leadership. Ordination is not a right but a gift and call from God. Leaders are judged by a higher standard (1 Tim. 3:1-13) and teachers have a special responsibility (James 3:1). The church is inclusive of all who need Christ and his salvation, but leadership is exclusive in the sense that those called to it must satisfy a higher standard and display necessary gifts. Refusal to repent of known behavior that the Bible calls sin is an indication that a person is not ready for church leadership.

5. We are not an inclusive church if we don't ordain homosexuals (G-4.0403). Isn't it discrimination to rule out a class of people for ordination?

G-6.0106b makes no judgment on a class of people. Sexual practices that the Scriptures and confessions call sin are not covered by G-4.0403 guaranteeing "full participation." This is the issue—does the church want to affirm the full participation of those who engage in a lifestyle contrary to Scripture and our confessional standards? The answer has been "no" throughout our church's history.

"Are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture..."

6. How can we "obey the Scriptures" when we can't agree on what the Scriptures mean?

Scripture speaks often, clearly and with one voice on marriage and sexual expression. The Bible describes incest, adultery, bestiality, fornication, prostitution, and homosexuality in negative, prohibitive terms (1 Cor. 6:18). Involvement in unrepentant, ongoing sexual sin is one of the few reasons Paul gave for excommunicating a church member (1 Cor. 5:1-5; 11-13).

7. Doesn't obedience to Scripture include loving our neighbor and accepting other unconditionally? Isn't this a matter on which we should exercise mutual forbearance?

The broad message of Scripture also includes the fall of humanity, the need for a Savior, the necessity of repentance and obedience, the power of the gospel, and the hope of glory! "God is love" does not make God unwilling to call sin what it is or to require our submission to his will.

Mutual forbearance is not a means of approving behavior that God does not accept. It is admonition to bear with a brother or sister who is struggling, and sometimes failing, to overcome sin. Forbearance is not intended as a waiver for behavioral standards of ordination. Scripture's admonition to us to bear with each other and to be constantly willing to forgive should instruct us: our attitude and behavior should be characterized by humility, recognizing that we all sin and are all continually in need of forgiveness, repentance, and restoration.

8. Isn't it true that Jesus never talked about homosexuality, either to approve of it or condemn it?

God's will is expressed in the whole of Scripture: "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." (2 Tim.

3:16) Although Jesus does not explicitly refer to same-sex intercourse, implicit references exist in Mark 7:21-23 and Mark 10:17-22. See Robert Gagnon's book, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* (Abingdon, 2001), pp.191-192. Jesus did clearly affirm marriage, quoting Genesis 2:24: "And a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."

10. The Spirit leads us into new truth. Since the Spirit is still working among us (indicated by continued questioning) shouldn't we be open-minded and seek discernment on this subject before deciding?

The Spirit does not lead us into any "truth" that contradicts what God has revealed in the Scriptures. Every new idea must be tested and found consistent with the revelation we have already received (1 John 4:1). The Spirit helps us to apply universal truth to new situations, and causes peace, not dissension (Gal 5:20).

"Among these standards..."

11. Isn't the church picking only on homosexual sin?

The value of G-6.0106b is that it does not single out homosexual sin, but calls all leaders of the church to fidelity in marriage or chastity in singleness. There are other sins that take hold of us and that have a destructive effect on the body. Scripture addresses them, and so should we in the church. Though homosexuality is being promoted today as an acceptable life-style, resisting that should not be an excuse to ignore other sinful behavior.

12. Wouldn't Amendment B simplify our life as a denomination? Isn't it in the best interest of Presbyterians to make these decisions in our local governing bodies and protect ourselves from decisions handed down from the national body?

G-6.0106b was not a dictate handed down from the General Assembly. Quite the contrary; it was a decision made by the vote of representatives from local sessions at the meetings of their presbyteries.

Far from simplifying our life, if Amendment B were to pass, it would create unprecedented chaos and conflict. Instead of ordination standards being held in common by us all, each ordaining body (session and presbytery) would set its own standards, and those standards would not be consistent but could vary for each person seeking ordination.

Officers (deacons, elders and ministers) are ordained to the whole church and ordained for life. The responsibilities and privileges of ordination continue even if an elder transfers church membership. Removing the standards clears the way for all manner of sexual expression outside of marriage by church leaders. Your congregation, if it chose to obey the clear biblical witness on sexual behavior, would nevertheless have no choice but to recognize elders ordained in Presbyterian churches that hold to a different set of standards. Presbytery Committees on Ministry, Committees on Preparation for Ministry, Administrative Commissions, and Permanent Judicial Commissions, would likely include elders and clergy with a variety of sexual standards.

All actions of any governing body are on behalf of the whole church:

"The governing bodies are separate and independent, but have such mutual relations that the act of one of them is the act of the whole church performed by it through the appropriate governing body." (G-9.0103) The church "is entitled to declare the terms of admission into its communion, and the qualifications of its ministers and members...." (G-1.0302)

“It is incumbent upon these officers, and the whole Church, in whose name they act, to censure or cast out the erroneous and scandalous, observing in all cases the rules contained in the Word of God.” (G-1.0303)

13. Won't this amendment take us back to the more peaceful days before 1978 when there was no such standard and each church decided ordinations for themselves?

Before 1978, the standard was clearly evident in Scripture and the Confessions. Those documents so guided the behavior of leaders in the church that it would be impossible to name even a handful of Presbyterians confessing to be in a homosexual lifestyle who were ordained prior to 1978. Sexual standards became an issue only when changes occurred in our culture and the long, consistent teaching of the Church was challenged. Throughout its history, the Church has held a standard that sexual intimacy belongs only within the context of the marriage of a man and a woman.

“Among these standards...” in a changing society

15. The Bible says that homosexual practice is a sin, but society is increasingly accepting of the gay lifestyle. Hasn't the church, too, been moving steadily toward acceptance of homosexual practice?

The evidence shows that the church has responded consistently and with even increasing conviction that it intends to maintain the biblical standard for sexual behavior. The worldwide Church today, with only a small minority exception, continues to affirm the biblical teaching. The PC(USA) as a body has acted with that majority.,

The 1996 GA approved what is now section G-6.0106b in the *Book of Order* and sent the proposed amendment to the presbyteries. After a vote of 97 presbyteries in favor and 74 opposed, the amendment became effective in 1997. The 1997 GA sent an amendment to replace the “fidelity in marriage and chastity in singleness” language of G-6.0106b, but the attempt failed with 59 presbyteries voting yes and 114 voting no. The 2001 GA sent an amendment proposing removal of G-6.0106b, but it failed with 46 presbyteries voting yes and 127 voting no. [historical material from “What G-6.0106b Means: A white paper prepared by The Presbyterian Coalition Task Force on Church Discipline”]

The Presbyterian Panel, a survey program of the PC(USA) Research Services, in its summary for 2006-2008, reports that a majority of Presbyterian pastors, elders, and members nationwide disapprove of the ordination of “sexually active gay and lesbian persons.”

Increasing cultural acceptance calls for a Christian response of loving concern for the sinner, well-reasoned arguments based on Scripture, and prayer for change in the culture. Within the church, we should make every effort to lead our brothers and sisters gently toward repentance.

“These standards...” in light of scientific research

17. Homosexuality is inborn, genetic. It is wrong to close the door to people who can't help being what they are. What the Bible means by “homosexuality” is different from our 21st Century understanding. Back then they didn't understand that some people are just born homosexual. If homosexuality is an inborn predisposition, isn't it cruel and unChristian to impose our current standard?

There is no consensus in the medical/scientific community about the causes of homosexual orientation. But the matter before us is not “homosexuality”; rather, the issue before us is the

ordination of those engaged in unrepentant homosexual practice. The Bible does not condone sexual relationships outside marriage by those who would claim a predisposition to heterosexuality.

Homosexual orientation may not be chosen, but homosexual acts are chosen, making the person who chooses them morally responsible. Biology is not destiny, as every person is created by God with the ability to make moral choices regardless of their biological predispositions. Some studies have “suggested” that the propensity to such things as adultery or lying or alcoholism is genetic. “Inborn” does not necessarily mean “normal” or “God ordained.”

Many secular psychologists have documented cases of changes in practice and even in orientation. Christians claim the transforming power of God in Christ. Do we wish to deny that claim for those caught in this particular sin? Amendment B sends a message of despair to those caught in sexual sin, whether homosexual or heterosexual. It sends the message that they are stuck in their sin and there is no hope.

People caught in sexual confusion are experiencing the conflict between their sinful humanity and the will of God, which is a conflict we all experience in various arenas. God’s will is often difficult, but it is always life-giving. He offers us forgiveness in Christ and the transforming power of his Spirit to live in conformity with his will.

What is truly cruel is to allow and encourage church leaders to live a lifestyle God has clearly condemned in Scripture.