



## The Case for Fidelity in Marriage or Chastity in Singleness G-6.0106b and Against Amendment 08-B

From the Issues Ministry of *presbyterians for renewal*

The 218<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (2008), by a vote of 380 to 325, has given us proposed Amendment B, which would delete biblical standards for the conduct of church officers:

### **G-6.0106b (current Book of Order standard)**

*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.*

The proposed Amendment B would delete the paragraph above and replace it with . . .

### **Amendment B (Proposed new language)**

*Those who are called to ordained service in the church, by their assent to the constitutional questions for ordination and installation (W-4.4003), pledge themselves to live lives obedient to Jesus Christ the Head of the Church, striving to follow where he leads through the witness of the Scriptures, and to understand the Scriptures through the instruction of the Confessions. In so doing, they declare their fidelity to the standards of the Church. Each governing body charged with examination for ordination and/or installation (G-14.0240 and G-14.0450) establishes the candidate's sincere efforts to adhere to these standards."*

G-6.0106b is perhaps the most thoroughly vetted, parsed, debated, and nit-picked paragraph in the Book of Order. It came out of the 208<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (1996) in Albuquerque and was approved in the presbyteries by a vote of 97 to 73. After the 209<sup>th</sup> G.A. (1997) attempted to remove it, the presbyteries reaffirmed it by a vote of 114 to 59. In 2001, the 212<sup>th</sup> G.A. again attempted to delete it, but G-6.0106b was reaffirmed by an even greater margin, 125 to 46.

The 218<sup>th</sup> G.A. has given us yet another opportunity to reaffirm our historic and biblical standards by defeating the proposed Amendment 08-B. We have opportunity once again to reject the innovations of the revisionists who seem determined to follow culture rather than Christ.

The Covenant Network of Presbyterians has produced a document, "G-6.0106b In PC(USA) Perspective," that seeks to make a case against G-6.0106b from a Reformed and Presbyterian standpoint, upholding Amendment 08-B as a superior alternative. Their case is not made. The tired arguments raised against G-6.0106b are not new. They have been weighed and found wanting three times by nationwide vote of Presbyterians. The following is not a point by point response, but a brief rebuttal to the central arguments.

## False Argument 1

***“Breaking with the Reformed Tradition, G-6.0106b treats officers as a superior class, distinct from other members of the body of Christ.”***

Not so. G-6.0106b expresses standards of conduct that most Christians in most times and places would consider basic for all members of the Body of Christ. G-6.0106b simply clarifies that we will not ordain those who openly and willfully refuse to repent of self-acknowledged sin and rely on God’s grace to strive toward godly living. In the Reformed Tradition we do not expect officers to be free from sin, but we do rightly expect them to model humility, repentance, and, by the Holy Spirit, amendment of life after the pattern of Christ.

G.6.0106b does not bar sinners from ordination. Sinners, after all, are the only sort of persons we can ordain. No Christian is free from sin, but no Christian, neither mature leader nor new convert, is free to misuse the grace of God as license for sin. (Rom. 6:1-18). G.6.0106b does not bar sinners from ordination, only those *refusing to repent*. It does not externally impose a standard, but appeals to individual conscience: only those refusing to repent of any *self-acknowledged* sin are barred from ordination.

The Heidelberg Catechism asks:

**Q. 115. “Why, then, does God have the Ten Commandments preached so strictly since no one can keep them in this life?”**

A. First, that all our life long we may become increasingly aware of our sinfulness, and therefore more eagerly seek forgiveness of sins and righteousness in Christ. Second, that we may constantly and diligently pray to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, so that more and more we may be renewed in the image of God, until we attain the goal of full perfection after this life.” (C-4.115)

The Heidelberg Catechism was written not for officers, but for children that they might grow to Christian maturity. Surely we can expect as much of adult officers today as was expected of children in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century.

## False Argument 2

***“G.6.0106b violates the Reformed tradition by calling for ‘obedience to Scripture’ rather than obedience to Jesus Christ.”***

This objection is misleading and misinformed. It is true that our first obedience must be to Jesus Christ, the risen and reigning Head of the Church. But how do we know the will of Christ? The unambiguous answer of the Reformed Tradition is nowhere more powerfully expressed than in the Theological Declaration of Barmen:

“Jesus Christ, *as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture*, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death.”  
(C-8.11, italics added)

What is alien to the Reformed Tradition is the effort to drive a wedge between Christ and Scripture, as if Christ’s leading could be found apart from the written Word of God. Also foreign to our tradition is the false notion that the will of Christ is found only in the Gospels, or even more simplistically, only in the “red letters,” or most dangerously, in some kind of “communal discernment” un-tethered from Scripture. In the Reformed tradition, the will of Christ is discerned when we humbly seek him in the whole of the Bible, in the power of the Spirit, with Jesus Christ himself as the touchstone of interpretation.

The Second Helvetic Confession expresses this indissoluble link between the authority of Christ and the authority of Scripture:

“...we acknowledge no other head of the Church than Christ . . . [and] we teach that the true Church is that in which the signs or marks of the true Church are to be found, especially the lawful and sincere preaching of the Word of God as it was delivered to us *in the books of the prophets and apostles, which all lead us to Christ*, who said in the Gospel: “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me... (John 10:5).” (C-5.134, italics added)

Obedience to Scripture is obedience to Christ, and obedience to Christ can be none other than obedience to Scripture. The strange notion that obedience to Scripture is alien to the Reformed Tradition is easily refuted by reference to the Book of Confessions:

Westminster Confession of Faith

The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed *and obeyed*,

dependeth not upon the testimony of any man or church, but wholly upon God (who is truth itself), the author thereof; and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God. (C-6.004, italics added)

Larger Catechism

**Q. 3. What is the Word of God?**

A. The holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the Word of God, the only rule of faith and *obedience*. (C-7.113, italics added)

Confession of 1967

The one sufficient revelation of God is Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate, to whom the Holy Spirit bears unique and authoritative witness through the Holy Scriptures, which are received *and obeyed* as the word of God written. (C-9.27, italics added)

## False Argument 3

***“G-6.0106b elevates the Confessions to the status of an absolute rule, leaving no room for human error in the Confessions, changing understandings, or freedom of conscience in interpretation of Scripture.”***

Wrong again. Ever since G-6.0106b was proposed, the canard has been repeated that calling for “conformity” to confessional standards or applying discipline based on what “the confessions call sin” is somehow un-Presbyterian; that Presbyterians would forget their theology and polity and become confessional absolutists, applying every clause with draconian literalism. This tired argument takes two phrases and lifts them out of the context in the whole of the Book of Order.

This parlor game can be played with language that has been in the Book of Order much longer than G-6.0106b. Take for instance this sentence from the Rules of Discipline:

“An offense [that may lead to disciplinary action] is any act or omission by a member or officer of the church that is contrary to the Scriptures or the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A).” (D-2.0203b)

Horrors! What fundamentalist sneaked this into our Book of Order? *Any* act or omission contrary to the Scriptures or Constitution? Gasp! Presbyterians will read Bible, Confessions, and Book of Order with a microscope! They’ll start filing disciplinary charges based on every rule they find!

Oh. Wait. No, they won't. Presbyterians know how to interpret Scripture, and they know how to be instructed and led by the Confessions. So, if confessional and scriptural legalism is not a problem in D-2.0203b, why then is it suddenly a problem in G-6.0106b? Could it be that this whole line of argument is a red herring, and that the real objection to G-6.0106b has nothing to do with what it says about Scripture and Confessions?

## **False Objection 4**

***“G-6.0106b trivializes the Christian calling by suggesting that faithfulness is dependent on a check-list of behaviors to avoid.”***

Where is this supposed check list? The wording and spirit of G-6.0106b are clear that the way to ordination is opened by repentance, not by measuring personal righteousness against an artificial standard. This alleged “trivialization”, like so many of the objections to G-6.0106b, exists only in the imagination of the critics, not in the plain sense of the Book of Order.

## **False Objection 5**

***“Historically and confessionally, chastity is a quality to be exhibited in all aspects of life and relationship; G-6.0106b reverses that intent, emphasizing form over substance and implying that ‘fidelity’ and ‘chastity’ are either/or rather than both/and.”***

This statement contains just enough truth to give it a patina of plausibility. In our confessions, chastity is indeed a “quality to be exhibited in all aspects of life and relationship.” But G-6.0106b, far from reversing this intent, upholds the very substance of the teaching of Scripture and confessions against those who would empty the words “fidelity” and “chastity” of their historic Christian meaning.

To buttress the above objection, the Covenant Network paper cites the Heidelberg Catechism:

**Q. 108. What does the seventh commandment teach us?**

**A.** That all unchastity is to be condemned by God, and that we should therefore detest it from the heart, and live chaste and disciplined lives, whether in holy wedlock or in single life.” (C-4.108)

The Heidelberg Catechism was written by Kaspar Olevianus and Zacharias Ursinus in 1562. Is there really a serious question as to what they meant when they said God’s prohibition of adultery calls us to “live chaste and disciplined lives, whether in holy wedlock or in single life”? In single life, to be chaste (at minimum!) is to abstain from genital sexual relations. In married life, to be chaste is not to abstain, but (at minimum!) to be lovingly and exclusively faithful to one’s spouse.

The Covenant Network is correct that “chastity” applies to married as well as single life. The Covenant Network is wrong to charge that G-6.0106b somehow excludes the quality of chastity from marriage. In calling the single to chastity and the married to fidelity it does no such thing. The charge of setting up a false “either/or” is another example of twisting and stretching language out of normal context and usage to create a “contradiction” that does not in fact exist.

## False Objection 6

***“Over a decade later [since G-6.0106b was adopted], the terms ‘fidelity’, ‘chastity’, and ‘singleness’ have still not been defined. Are persons in committed relationships considered single simply because they do not have a marriage license? What about same-gender couples who are legally married? One might assume that ‘fidelity’ and ‘chastity’ are used in reference to sexual expression, but it is not clear what actions would be deemed to violate the ‘requirement.’ G-6.0106b devalues marriage by treating it primarily as a ‘license for sex’.”***

As muddled as this set of objections is, its purpose is transparent: to inject a fog of confusion into language that is perfectly clear. If the phrase, “fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness,” were really vague and undefined, why then is it so hated by the revisionists who want to overturn the historic Christian standard it represents? Make no mistake; G-6.0106b is despised by revisionists not because it is unclear, but because it is crystal clear. Nonetheless, let’s take the objections raised here one at a time.

***“The terms ‘fidelity’, ‘chastity’, and ‘singleness’ have still not been defined.”***

If we were to poll Christians the world over, the vast majority without a moment’s hesitation could tell us exactly what is meant by fidelity in marriage or chastity in singleness. They would probably be dumbfounded we needed to ask. If we could get in a time machine and inquire of Christians in times past, especially prior to say, 1960, the vast major-

ity would give us a quick definition, and probably wonder what in the future could go so wrong as to provoke such a question.

In the mid 1940's, C. S. Lewis wrote:

Chastity is the most unpopular of the Christian virtues. There is no getting away from it: the old Christian rule is, "Either marriage, with complete faithfulness to your partner, or else abstinence." Now this is so difficult and so contrary to our instincts, that obviously either Christianity is wrong or our sexual instinct, as it now is, has gone wrong. One or the other. Of course, being a Christian, I think it is the instinct which has gone wrong.<sup>1</sup>

C.S. Lewis had his critics, even among Christians. But none challenged him on this simple assertion of Christian sexual morality. There was no question what the standard was or what the words meant. In 1964, at the beginning of the "sexual revolution", the liberal ethicist Harvey Cox wrote, "The question of premarital chastity is not the only one in which the yawning disparity between what we *say* and what we *do* in America is being questioned and examined."<sup>2</sup> Cox challenged the standard of premarital chastity, claiming we were (in 1964) teaching young people "the selfsame code of total premarital abstinence that was instilled into [the Puritan] Priscilla Alden."<sup>3</sup> Cox was among the pioneers of the revisionist movement, but he would never have suggested we didn't know what "chastity" meant for single people, or married for that matter. It meant abstinence outside of marriage, and faithfulness within marriage. Cox thought the standard of chastity was outdated and in need of revision. He was profoundly wrong about that, but at least he didn't try to confuse the issue by pretending the words were undefined.

***"Are persons in committed relationships considered single simply because they do not have a marriage license?"***

Yes, such persons are single. The PC(USA) Book of Order states:

Marriage is a gift God has given to all humankind for the wellbeing of the entire human family. *Marriage is a civil contract between a woman and a man.* For Christians marriage is a covenant through which a man and a woman are called to live out together before God their lives of discipleship. In a service of Christian mar-

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1960) p. 75.

<sup>2</sup> Harvey Cox, "Evangelical Ethics and the Ideal of Chastity" in *Witness to a Generation: Significant Writings from Christianity and Crisis (1941-1966)*, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1966) p. 151.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

riage a lifelong commitment is made by a woman and a man to each other, publicly witnessed and acknowledged by the community of faith. (W-4.9001, italics added)

In our PC(USA) polity, “*marriage is a civil contract* between a woman and a man.” If there is no civil contract recognized by the state, there is no marriage. Those not married are single. Scripture, Confessions, and Book of Order know nothing of “committed relationships” considered equivalent to marriage.

***“What about same-gender couples who are legally married?”***

The PC(USA), along with the vast majority of Christians in all times and places, does not recognize same-sex marriage. Again, “marriage is a civil contract *between a woman and a man.*” Presbyterian PJC decisions have consistently held that our constitution does not allow or recognize same-sex marriages. As far as the Church is concerned, persons in same-sex “marriages” are single, regardless of what the state says.

***“One might assume that ‘fidelity’ and ‘chastity’ are used in reference to sexual expression, but it is not clear what actions would be deemed to violate the ‘requirement.’”***

It is true that Christian sexual mores have evolved over time, and find differing expression in different cultures. What one generation or culture considers taboo might be accepted by another. For instance, in contemporary American society, a kiss shared by a teenage couple is considered innocent, while in other more conservative cultures it would be out of bounds. But across time and across cultures the vast majority of Christians would agree that chastity for the single means, at minimum, abstaining from genital sexual relations. In marriage, fidelity means, at minimum, exclusive faithfulness to one’s spouse.

Personal note from the author: In 30 years of ministry among young people, I’ve found that Christian teenagers know *exactly* where the line is. They may not like it. They may cross over it. But they know *exactly* where it is.

***“G-6.0106b devalues marriage by treating it primarily as a ‘license for sex.’”***

“License for sex” is, to put it mildly, an unfair caricature of 2,000 years of Christian teaching on the sanctity of marriage. G-6.0106b, far from devaluing marriage, affirms the bibli

cal Christian standard that the marriage of a man and a woman is the only relationship in which genital sexual intimacy is appropriate. G-6.0106b is not intended to be a full definition of Christian marriage, nor is it a full statement of Christian sexual ethics. It is a gracious call to repentance and obedience to Christ in all areas of life.

The Service of Christian Marriage in the Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship* includes the beautiful “Statement on the Gift of Marriage.” It says in part:

God created us male and female, and God gave us marriage  
so that husband and wife may help and comfort each other,  
living faithfully together in plenty and in want,  
in joy and in sorrow,  
in sickness and in health,  
throughout all their days.

God gave us marriage  
for the full expression of the love between a man and a woman.  
In marriage a woman and a man belong to each other,  
and with affection and tenderness freely give themselves to each other.

God gave us marriage  
for the well-being of human society,  
for the ordering of family life,  
and for the birth and nurture of children.

God gave us marriage as a holy mystery  
in which a man and a woman are joined together and become one,  
just as Christ is one with the Church.<sup>4</sup>

The standard expressed in G-6.0106b is in perfect harmony with the depth of theology expressed here. The deletion of G-6.0106b would devalue the theology expressed here, and suggest to the world that we no longer really believe it.

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<sup>4</sup> *Book of Common Worship*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 842.

## False Objection 7

***“There are hundreds of “practices which the confessions call sin,” making G-6.0106b far too broad to be applied with honesty and equity, and has made hypocrites of all who claim to uphold it.”***

This objection is as self-contradictory as it is uncharitable. First, it takes G-6.0106b out of constitutional context, interpreting it in the most legalistic and rigid way possible. Then, it accuses the church of hypocrisy for not being as legalistic and rigid as its artificial reading.

Presbyterian officers take a vow to be “instructed and led” by the confessions as they lead the people of God (W-4.4003c). Surely this includes being instructed and led by the confessions as to what constitutes sin. Presbyterians know how to read their confessions in historical context, and they know how to interpret them in light of the higher authority of God’s Word. Nothing in G-6.0106b obliges them to do otherwise.

G-6.0106b does not empower anyone to use the confessions to go sin hunting. It does implement the will of the Church that we will not ordain those who willfully engage in *self-acknowledged* and *unrepentant* sinful practice. That is the heart and effect of the paragraph.

We offer these thoughts in the hope that you, into whose hands this critical decision has now been placed, will have the information necessary to frame biblical, respectful, and Christ-honoring responses to common misconceptions about Amendment o8-B.

We encourage you to be an active participant in conversations involving those with whom you agree or disagree. As you speak and as you listen, rejoice in the opportunity to offer witness to the truth of God’s transforming love and grace, and speak God’s Truth with confidence, compassion, and joy!