



Thoughts to Consider in Preparation for Presbytery Discussions

From the Issues Ministry of *presbyterians for renewal*

The Issues Ministry of PFR offers the following thoughts to consider as a resource for presbytery commissioners as they prepare for the debate and vote on Amendment o8-B.

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."

The most effective response will be the one that comes from your own heart and mind. We recommend you use these examples to inform and inspire your own thinking and writing. Most of all, pray. Ask the Lord to prepare your heart and mind to speak clearly, graciously, and truthfully, and in the love of Christ.

The Word of God clearly teaches the standard of “fidelity in marriage and chastity in singleness.”

Amendment B would delete an historic standard that is based on the clear teaching of the Bible. The foundation of the fidelity/chastity standard is given in the vision of creation seen in Genesis 2:24 (NRSV): “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.” These words are quoted and reaffirmed by Jesus in Matthew 19:5, and by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 6:16. The joining of a man and a woman in marriage is the only “one-flesh” union blessed in Scripture. It is on the foundation of this positive teaching that numerous texts in both Old and New Testaments specifically prohibit all sexual relations, whether heterosexual or homosexual, outside the marriage of a man and a woman.

The New Testament sexual ethic is based on the principle that we have been redeemed by Jesus’ death on the cross and so we belong to him. 1 Corinthians 6:18 says, “Do

you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?” Because we have been “bought with a price” (v. 20) and are “not [our] own,” we are to “shun fornication” – that is, we are to honor Christ with our bodies by not engaging in any sexual activity outside the marriage of a man and a woman. This is a high standard, and not easy, especially in today’s permissive atmosphere. But fidelity/chastity is what God’s Word teaches and we are called to obey. Amendment B would make this standard optional.

There is no analogy to the ordination of women.

It is said that the church changed its mind about the ordination of women, even though some Bible texts seem to prohibit women in leadership. Therefore the church today should change its mind about homosexuality and other sexual relations outside the marriage of a man and woman. But this supposed analogy breaks down when you look closely at what the Bible actually says.

The Presbyterian Church did not start ordaining women because we stopped reading the Bible! No! We started ordaining women because we finally read the whole Bible and everything it says about women in leadership.

The Book of Genesis tells us that men and women are created equally in the image of God. In the Old Testament, Judge Deborah and Huldah the Prophetess held positions of authority over men. In the New Testament Jesus welcomed women in his inner circle and women were the first witnesses of the Resurrection. In Acts, Priscilla was a teacher of Apollos. In Romans 16, Paul names Phoebe as a “deacon” or minister, and Junia (or Julia) as an “apostle.” In the Corinthian church, women spoke as prophets in public worship (that is, authoritatively speaking a message from the Lord) and Paul’s only concern was that they cover their heads! Paul taught, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28, NRSV)

In light of the whole Bible, the two texts that would seem to limit the role of women (1 Corinthians 14:34 and 1 Timothy 2:12) should be seen as a temporary limitation on those women who were coming out of the synagogue context where they had not been allowed to learn the Scriptures.

In contrast, the Bible speaks with one voice in prohibiting homosexual relations and heterosexual relations outside of marriage. Both are forbidden and condemned with-

out exception anywhere in Scripture. There simply is no analogy in this debate to the ordination of women.

There is no analogy to the abolition of slavery.

It is sometimes said the church once defended slavery by quoting Scripture, but we changed our minds. Therefore, this argument goes, we should now change our minds about homosexuality and other relations outside the marriage of a man and woman. But the supposed analogy doesn't hold up.

It is true the Bible assumes the existence of slavery and regulates it, making it a much more humane institution than in most of the ancient world. But the Bible also profoundly undermines slavery. The central saving act of God in the Old Testament is the liberation of the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt. In the New Testament, Paul affirms "there is no longer slave or free...for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28) Paul pled with Philemon to welcome the escaped slave Onesimus back, "no longer a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother [in Christ]." (Philemon 16) In 1 Timothy 1:10 "slave traders" are listed among those whose actions are "contrary to sound teaching."

The Bible never commands anyone to hold slaves. But it does, as the Christian Abolitionist movement correctly saw, profoundly undermine the institution of slavery. The church turned against slavery not because we ignored the Bible, but because we finally read the whole thing. In contrast, the Bible speaks with one voice and without exception in prohibiting homosexual acts and heterosexual acts outside of marriage. There is no analogy between slavery and the question before us.

There is no analogy to divorce.

It is sometimes said that in past times divorced persons were barred from ordained office, but we softened our stand. In the same way, this argument goes; we should now soften our stand on homosexual or heterosexual relations outside of the marriage of a man and a woman. But the analogy doesn't hold up.

The Bible treats divorce very seriously, and so must we. In Malachi 2:16 the Lord says, "I hate divorce." But the Lord loves divorced persons, and so must the church. Both Old and New Testaments make provision for divorce. Both Old and New Testaments

make provision for remarriage after divorce. Jesus specifically made provision for divorce and remarriage (Matthew 19:9), as does the Apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 7:10-16).

The gospel is about redemption, forgiveness, and new life. In keeping with these great themes of the gospel, the Presbyterian Church long ago settled confessionally the matter of remarriage after divorce. The Westminster Confession now says, "...remarriage after a divorce granted on grounds explicitly stated in Scripture or implicit in the gospel of Christ may be sanctioned in keeping with his redemptive gospel, when sufficient penitence for sin and failure is evident, and a firm purpose and endeavor after Christian marriage is manifest." (Book of Confessions 6.132)

The Confession rightly calls us to "penitence for sin and failure" and a "firm purpose" in the future to follow God's good will of one man and one woman in lifelong fidelity. Amendment B, on the other hand, in removing our "fidelity/chastity" standard, would sanction lifestyles in which such penitence and purpose are absent. There is no legitimate analogy to divorce and remarriage.

This amendment would be subject to very different interpretations in different presbyteries.

Amendment B removes clear, specific, easy-to-understand standards regarding ethical relationships, and replaces those standards with ambiguity. The language of this amendment would be interpreted very differently in different presbyteries.

As the amendment itself says, each governing body charged with ordaining or installing officers is going to have to establish a candidate's "sincere effort" to adhere to the standards of the Church. What standards? Each governing body will choose its own path in defining whether and how a person's relationships really follow where Jesus leads through the witness of the Scriptures. Polity is supposed to remove this kind of confusion, not create it.

The result would be a split in practice.

If Amendment 08-B passes, we can all foresee that some presbyteries will interpret its language very differently than others. An ordination might be valid in one part of the country, and utterly invalid in another. The pool of candidates for any given call would be a confusing jumble. Who's eligible? Who's not?

The workload would pile up on presbytery committees if every time a minister or elder moves, some committee has to consider not just the appropriateness of their new call but the validity of their ordination from day one.

Presbyteries would balkanize.

This new attempt to please everyone will serve no one well. The result will be more division and more discord in the church. There will be battles within presbyteries to determine how the language will be interpreted. There will be individual churches who distrust each other's ordination of elders. There will be confusing, shifting alliances of presbyteries as they struggle to understand each other's ordination policies. No one will trust another governing body's ordinations. And who knows what uncomfortable processes will have to be invented to vet each other's ordination decisions?

In practice, there would be something to offend everyone: some by ordinations that did happen, others by ordinations that were denied.

This amendment would result in a crazy-quilt of differing ordination practices throughout the country. Some presbyteries and sessions would apply one set of standards, while others made ordination decisions using a completely different set of standards. Removing clear standards will not bring hoped for peace to our church. Removing the fidelity/chastity standard at this time would give us two black eyes, one from the left and one from the right because both sides would be offended by the action of some governing bodies, and have reason to hold the PCUSA in scorn.

Passage of B would lead to an increase in PJC cases.

This amendment would throw thirty years of church judicial decisions into chaos. Presbyteries and sessions would suddenly have no precedents to guide ordination decisions. In our system, the only way to fill this void would be to bring case after case before the church courts. Each judicial case would waste time and energy arguing over matters we don't agree on, waiting for decisions that won't solve our deepest problems. As the world watches us repeatedly going to court as opponents, people

lose faith in the church's ability simply to be the church. No one wants to be part of a church where rival attorneys are making the most frequent news headlines.

New proposed sexuality amendments would dominate the next GA.

We've gotten ourselves into a cycle of endless proposed amendments on ordination standards. If this amendment were to pass it would not lead to peace and would not end the discussion. But it would invite yet another wave of proposed amendments that would dominate the agendas of General Assemblies for years to come. It is time to let the church live with the result of the many votes we have taken on this issue over the last thirty years. It is time to stop divisive votes that only harm the church. The discussion will go on, but let's find a way to talk about it that does not involve more rounds of voting.

The Global Church would be forced to distance itself from us.

If we vote to remove this standard, we will have put ourselves in schism with the vast majority in the global church. In the Two-Thirds World, where the church is growing like crazy, they have no patience for the unbiblical sexual libertinism of Europe and North America. In fact, some Christians are in peril of persecution simply for being associated with any group or church that would condone such things. Wouldn't it be ironic if the PCUSA, which gave birth to so many of these now vibrant churches, were cut off from them by our own departure from clear biblical teaching? Talk about breaking the unity of the Church! Our unity is much bigger than the PCUSA!

The PUP Task Force called for the standards to remain in place.

The Peace, Unity, and Purity Report, which was approved by the 2006 General Assembly, was based on the premise that our present ordination standards remain in place. The PUP Task Force recommended returning to an old Presbyterian polity, dating back to 1729, which allows candidates to claim a scruple on a non essential of the faith. The local governing body (presbytery for ministers and the congregation for elders and deacons) listens to a candidate's scruple, and then makes the decision if that individual's scruple is on an essential or non essential tenant of the constitution. These case by case ordination decisions are based on national standards and local application. The Peace, Unity, and Purity Task Force did not recommend changing the present ordi-

nation standards. In order for the PUP experiment to continue the present standards should remain in place. Presbyteries should vote no or vote to take no action on replacing G-6.0106b, with O8-B. To replace the fidelity and chastity amendment would be to derail the experiment of PUP, which many viewed as the last hope of the denomination to stay together.