

DEFENDING THE PLAIN MEANING OF THE SEXUALITY MANDATE IN G-6.0106b OF THE *BOOK OF ORDER*

Remarks prepared by Robert Gagnon, Elder Commissioner from Pittsburgh Presbytery, for presenting the Minority Report on 04-02 (“On Confirming the Requirements in G-6.0106b of ‘Fidelity’ and ‘Chastity’”) before the 217th General Assembly on Wednesday, June 21, 2006, recommending the following authoritative interpretation of G-6.0106b (amended item 04-02):

The 217th General Assembly (2006) of the PC(USA) hereby confirms that the requirement for fidelity and/or chastity as set forth in Section G-6.0106b of the *Book of Order* plainly prohibits practicing, unrepentant homosexuals, adulterers, or anyone engaged in unrepentant sexual relations outside the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman from being ordained and/or installed to church office whether as deacons, elders, or ministers of the Word and Sacrament.

[Section G-6.0106b of the *Book of Order* provides that “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.”]

I am a professor of New Testament at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. If I were to tell a class, “There will be a major exam in four weeks,” and then give an additional, unannounced major exam three days later, I would break trust with the class. I would do so by interpreting words to mean things that, in context, do not normally mean such to reasonable persons. The very act of announcing a future exam creates the common supposition that there will be no second, intervening exam. It would be wholly inappropriate to say in my defense, “But I never explicitly said that I *wouldn’t* give an exam in three days.”

Yesterday the General Assembly, or more specifically 57% of GA, broke trust with the denomination by making language in the Book of Order mean what it does not normally mean to reasonable persons acting reasonably. No one in the PCUSA has ever answered my question:

How can an ordination requirement in the Book of the Order such as the sexuality standard in G-6.0106b, a standard that is specifically *singled out* for obedience from amongst all other confessional standards, be construed reasonably by an ordaining or installing body as nonessential?

For an ordaining/installing body to claim that the sexuality requirement for officers in G-6.0106b is nonessential, and thus no necessary barrier to ordination, would make nonsensical the act of singling out a standard for obedience. *Why make a point of singling out a standard if not to insist that this standard, at least, must be observed as an essential of ordained office?* Moreover, Scripture treats homosexual practice as a violation whose severity is on the order of, or worse than, a man having consensual sexual relations with his mother. This is in keeping with the historic view of the church over two millennia.

In the normal meaning of words in context, it is not necessary to use the word “essential” to communicate the absolutely mandatory character of the standard. The very act of singling out makes this implicit. And yet, against all reason, the Task Force Report states that an ordaining/installing body could reasonably judge serial unrepentant sexual relations outside of male-female marriage as a violation of a nonessential standard that would pose “no barrier to ordination” “with the help of the Spirit” (ll. 1225-32).

By the same token, even though the word “essential” is not explicitly used of the **first ordination vow**—“Do you trust in Jesus Christ your Savior, acknowledge him Lord of all and Head of the Church, and through him believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?”—it would be an obvious distortion of the *Constitution* for an ordaining or installing body to conclude that this is a nonessential standard for ordination. The fact that it is an ordination *vow*—indeed, the first one—and the significance of the confession of Christ as Lord and Savior both in the New Testament and in the historic faith of the church make clear that this confession is essential for ordination and installation. And yet the new authoritative interpretation puts the determination of the essential character of *all* ordination requirements almost exclusively in the hands of local (session) and regional (presbytery) ordaining and installing bodies. And it is by no means clear that the amendment added to Rec. 5—“whether the examination and ordination and installation decision comply with the constitution of the PCUSA”—would prevent this kind of distortion from occurring at the local and regional level, since the Task Force’s own rationale for Rec. 5 appears to permit such distortions.

Non-compliance with the plain meaning of the Book of Order betrays the common trust. And yet we have repeatedly heard from supporters of Recommendation 5, “Trust us.”

In approving the Task Force Report’s Recommendation 5, the General Assembly approved an amendment to the *Book of Order* in the guise of an “Authoritative Interpretation” that needs no ratification by the presbyteries. In effect, a radical change in the *Constitution of the PCUSA* was effected by a mere General Assembly vote. The reason why the Task Force and other supporters of Recommendation 5 strongly resisted referring the recommendation to the presbyteries for approval is not hard to guess: They know that the presbyteries would disapprove it, just as the presbyteries defeated three earlier efforts at thwarting this sexual standard, by ever increasing margins (1997, 1998, and 2002).

I don’t know whether trust can ever be restored in the PCUSA. Yet by approving this Minority Report and thereby acknowledging the plain meaning of G-6.0106b you can begin to make a goodwill gesture toward restoring that trust. G-6.0106b clearly prohibits officers

of the church from having *any* sexual relations outside the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman.

While this sense will appear obvious to most, it is not obvious to all. The Advisory Committee on the Constitution, for example, has stated that G-6.0106b does not clearly prohibit homosexual practice.

- The ACC argues that “**chastity in singleness**” is unclear. Yet “chastity *in singleness*” as the only alternative to “fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman” has historically meant in the church only one thing: abstinence from *all* sexual activity. Jesus himself was quite clear that sexual relations must be confined to marriage between a man and a woman (Matthew 19). Even “born eunuchs,” which in Jesus’ day probably included men with an exclusive sexual attraction for men, were subject to this prerequisite.
- The ACC also claims that the phrase “**any practice that the confessions call sin**” is too ambiguous. Yet surely the immediately preceding sentence makes clear that the phrase *minimally* includes sexual relations outside of marriage.
- Finally, the ACC makes the astounding claim that a person cannot be charged with “**refusing to repent**” if he or she does not believe the behavior in question to be sinful. But it is precisely to such a person that a call to repentance is most needed. Christ’s call to repentance is both universal and specific and in no way depends on the concurrence of offenders for its validity.

I call on the Assembly to begin to restore trust to the PCUSA by turning aside from postmodernist twisting of language in the *Book of Order* and letting words mean what reasonable people reasonably infer them to mean. Only then can we begin the long, hard work of restoring constitutional trust in the Presbyterian Church U.S.A.

[Note: The 217th General Assembly rejected the Minority Report by a vote of 335/169/5, partly because the Assembly had already accepted the Task Force Report’s Recommendation 6, which strongly urged the Assembly “to approve no additional authoritative interpretations . . . that would have the effect of changing denominational policy on . . . sexuality and ordination.”]