

Overture: On Amending G-6.0108b, “Freedom of Conscience within Certain Bounds,” to Include a Freedom of Ordaining Bodies within Certain Bounds

Recommendation

The Presbytery of Pittsburgh overtures the 218th General Assembly (2008) to direct the Stated Clerk to send the following proposed amendment to the presbyteries for their affirmative or negative vote:

Shall G-6.0108b (“Freedom of Conscience Within Certain Bounds”) be amended as follows: [Text to be added is shown as italic.]

“b. 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. The decision as to whether a person has departed from essentials of Reformed faith and polity is made initially by the individual concerned but ultimately becomes the responsibility of the governing body in which he or she serves. *This responsibility does not give the governing body constitutional grounds to define essentials in ways that ignore clear indicators in the Book of Order regarding what is essential. These indicators include standards specified in ordination vows in the Book of Order; standards singled out in the Book of Order for compliance from amongst other standards; and standards oft repeated in diverse contexts in the Book of Order.*”

Rationale

A summary of the rationale is as follows:

- The controversial, narrowly adopted (57%) 2006 Authoritative Interpretation of G-6.0108b (“Freedom of Conscience within Certain Bounds”) encourages local and regional ordaining bodies to ignore clear indicators in the *Book of Order* itself that certain standards are essential for ordained officers.¹
- Three such indicators are when a particular standard is *specified in ordination vows* (the affirmation Christ as Savior and Lord), *singled out from amongst other standards* for special compliance (the standard for sexual purity), or *repeated often in diverse contexts* (acceptance of the ministry of women).² These contexts create a reasonable expectation among reasonable readers that the particular

¹ The AI states that “ordaining and installing bodies ... have the responsibility to determine ... whether any departure [from standards] constitutes a failure to adhere to the essentials of Reformed faith and polity under G-6.0108 of the Book of Order, thus barring the candidate from ordination and/or installation.”

² While not an exhaustive list, these three indicators do have great relevance for current debates in the recent history of the PCUSA.

standard must be essential. Otherwise, there would be no reason for including it in an ordination vow, singling it out from amongst other standards, or repeating it in diverse contexts.³

- Yet the rationale for the 2006 AI states that an ordaining body can judge non-compliance with the sexuality standard in G-6.0106b not to violate essentials,⁴ despite the fact that G-6.0106b clearly *singles out* from “among” “the historic confessional standards of the church” the “requirement” that ordained officers confine sexual intercourse to “the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman.”⁵
- If an ordaining body can ignore such a clear literary indicator of what is essential,⁶ then an ordaining body could just as easily judge a departure from the first ordination vow requiring trust in Christ as one’s “Savior” and “Lord of all” (W-4.4003) or the declaration of a scruple with regard to the acceptance of women’s ordination not to violate the essentials of Reformed faith and polity.⁷ This is especially so since the Task Force rationale cites the Adopting Act of 1729

³ The necessity of accepting women’s ordination is repeated in diverse contexts throughout the Form of Government of the *Book of Order*. G-6.0105 makes clear that “Both men and women *shall* be eligible to hold church.” Likewise, G-14.0221 states: “Every congregation shall elect men and women from among its active members . . . to the office of elder and to the office of deacon.” G-9.0105a (“Committee on Representation”) mandates: “Each governing body above the session shall elect a committee on representation, whose membership shall consist of equal numbers of men and women.” A specific duty of this committee is to “advocate for the representation of . . . women” (c). According to G-13.0111a, “Consideration shall be given to the nomination of equal numbers of ministers (both women and men).” G-1.0100b (“Christ calls the church into being”) refers to Christ “exercising his authority by the ministry of women and men.” G-3.0401b (“Called to Openness”) states: “The Church is called . . . to a new openness” about “becoming in fact as well as in faith a community of women and men.”

⁴ The text of G-6.0106b is as follows: “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” (emphasis added).

⁵ According to the *Final Report* of the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church: “If an ordaining or installing body determines that an officer-elect has departed from G-6.0106b, . . . [and judges this departure] not to violate the essentials of Reformed faith and polity . . . then there is no barrier to ordination” (*A Season of Discernment*, pp. 40-41, ll. 1222-29).

⁶ If a teacher or parent should say, “Among all my requirements I want to point out this particular requirement as something that must be complied with,” then a student or child, respectively, who contended that the requirement was not “essential” would be in obvious, even perverse, error.

⁷ An example of how this might happen occurred on May 16, 2007 when the Permanent Judicial Commission of the Synod of the Trinity ruled in case no. 06-09 that the Pittsburgh Presbytery could not define *any* essentials prior to specific cases and then must redefine essentials for each new ordination examination: “Essentials of the faith . . . cannot be predetermined. . . . [D]epartures from essential tenets, must be determined on a case by case basis within the ordination process.” The problem with this reasoning is that if an essential has to be determined on a case by case basis then it is not “essential” as a churchwide standard. It can only be an essential for the particular case of a particular person. By this decision the presbytery could not “predetermine” that believing in Christ as Savior and Lord or accepting the validity of women’s ordination is an “essential” for ordination. The ordaining body would have to revisit the question of whether this is an essential at each and every ordination examination.

as establishing a virtual absolute right on the part of local and regional ordaining bodies to determine for themselves what standards are essential.⁸

- Inasmuch as the spin given by 2006 AI on G-6.0108b runs counter to the purpose for which it was formulated—namely to protect a *national* standard (i.e. women’s ordination) from candidates who might declare a contrary scruple—it is necessary to reassert the freedom of the collective conscience of the denomination as a whole, especially as enshrined in its constitutional documents.⁹

As to answering possible objections to the amendment the following may be noted:

(1) Someone might counter that the 217th General Assembly (2006) added to the Task Force’s AI a safeguard; namely, that higher governing bodies may review “whether the examination and ordination and installation decision comply with the constitution of the PCUSA.” Even so, this addition did not offer the courts themselves any guidelines for determining essentials in the *Book of Order* that would safeguard against excessive judicial activism (as can be seen from the recent decision of the PJC of the Synod of the Trinity; cited in n. 7 above).

(2) Someone might contend that not all “requirements” or “mandated” practices are essential and that consequently failure to comply with the “mandatory” sexual “requirement” in G-6.0106b is not a necessary bar to ordination. While such contentions regrettably make words mean what they do not normally mean and nullify clear distinctions in the *Book of Order*’s Preface between mandated practices on the one hand and practices merely recommended or permitted on the other hand, they are nevertheless beside the point here. We can all agree that the implicit literary force and effect of *singling out* for compliance a particular requirement from amongst all other standards is to establish the essential status of the requirement. The same holds true for inserting a standard in an ordination vow (so the affirmation of Christ as Savior and Lord) or repeatedly citing a standard in diverse contexts (the validity of women in ministry).

(3) Some may fear that this amendment establishes too much certitude in interpreting texts or creates a detailed litmus text of orthodoxy. Such a fear would be misplaced. The purpose of this amendment is *not* to contend that *all* texts are equally obvious or to define what *all* the essentials are as regards ordination standards. Rather the purpose is to prevent arbitrary or ideologically-based circumventions of some obvious essentials.¹⁰ Put differently, the purpose of this

⁸ In point of fact, the Adopting Act of 1729 addressed finer points of Calvinist doctrine contained in a voluminous, undifferentiated document like the Westminster Standards. It was certainly never intended to allow local or regional ordaining bodies the autonomy to ordain someone who denied the lordship of Jesus Christ or who engaged in sexual intercourse outside the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman.

⁹ What was the point of the majority of the presbyteries in voting to incorporate this sexuality standard in the *Book of Order* in 1996-97 and then to deny by ever greater margins vigorous attempts to remove it in 1997-98 and 2001-2002 if not to communicate this: “Failure to comply with this singled-out standard would be a *necessary* barrier to ordination”? If the majority of presbyteries had only wanted to have a standard that could be viewed as nonessential, there would have been no reason to single it out for compliance in the Form of Government.

¹⁰ The Presbyterian Church operates on a principle of connectionalism. This includes the right to establish on a national level some minimal beliefs and practices for officers of the church that, when met with noncompliance, become necessary barriers to ordination. For example, the national governing body today could not, and would not, allow the ordination of avowed racists, participants in loving adult-consensual incest or polyamory, persons who declared Jesus to be delusional, or even persons who rejected the validity of women’s ordination.

amendment is to establish that *some* standards in the *Book of Order* are clearly presented as essential (i.e. necessary barriers to ordination when not fulfilled by the candidate) even though the precise word “essential” is not used.

A related purpose is to reassert that, despite some radical postmodernist views to the contrary, the communication symbols that constitute the written text of the *Book of Order* and the literary conventions that accompany their use must be given their normal agreed-upon sense if church members are to have any confidence in the process of discernment. Certain literary moves such as placing a given requirement in the context of an ordination vow, singling it out to make a special point about the necessity of compliance, or citing it repeatedly in diverse contexts create an implicit contract of meaning with reasonable readers interpreting reasonably and contextually. Not to draw the obvious conclusion that such contexts establish the ordination requirement as *essential* is to violate that contract of meaning and engender distrust and cynicism regarding process.¹¹

In short, there is nothing radical about this amendment. It simply reinstates the practice of reading literary indicators of meaning in the *Book of Order* reasonably—a practice that had generally operated before the passage of the 2006 AI on G-6.0108b.¹²

¹¹ The alternative is a way of reading texts where there are no generally accepted conventions for expected meaning. This would render all texts, including every standard expressed in the *Book of Order*, as meaningless. Then there would be no point to reading, interpreting, citing, adjudicating by means of, or amending the Constitution of the PCUSA except as an exercise of raw, arbitrary power. And then there would be no point to the existence of the PCUSA as a denominational entity.

¹² At the time of the writing of this overture, it is unclear whether the proposed extensive revisions of Form of Government will replace the current version. If it does, then the appropriate adjustments in the proposed amendment are to be made. Based on the draft of the proposed new FOG retrieved from <http://www.pcusa.org/formofgovernment/pdfs/form-of-government.pdf> on 1/7/08, “G-6.0108b” would have to be replaced with “G-2.0104”; “Freedom of Conscience within Certain Bounds” with just “Freedom of Conscience”; and “governing body” with “council.”