

## G-6.0106b IN PC(USA) PERSPECTIVE

*“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...”*

***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.***

*“... ordained officers differ from other members in function only.” G-6.0102*

- Breaking with the Reformed tradition, G-6.0106b treats officers as a superior class, distinct from other members of the Body of Christ. 08-B calls officers to high standards but acknowledges that they, like all Christians, are on a journey of discipleship, seeking to be faithful but always falling short.

*“Confessions and declarations are subordinate standards in the church, subject to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as the Scriptures bear witness to him. No one type of confession is exclusively valid, no one statement is irreformable. Obedience to Jesus Christ alone identifies the one universal church and supplies the continuity of its tradition. This obedience is the ground of the church’s duty and freedom to reform itself in life and doctrine as new occasions, in God’s providence, may demand.” Confession of 1967, 9.03*

- G-6.0106b substitutes Scripture for Jesus Christ, who alone is the source of the church’s peace, unity, purity, and salvation. 08-B restores the hierarchy of authority reflected in our Confessions and in the ordination/installation questions (W-4.4003): obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture, guided by confessions.

*“All synods or councils since the apostles’ times, whether general or particular, may err, and many have erred; therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith or practice, but to be used as a help in both.” Westminster Confession of Faith, 6.175*

- G-6.0106b establishes the confessions as rules of faith and practice in the matter of that which is to be considered sinful, leaving no allowance for error, changing understandings, or freedom of conscience in interpretation of Scripture. 08-B returns the confessions to their role as guide to interpretation of Scripture.

*“But we hold that interpretation of the Scripture to be orthodox and genuine which is gleaned from the Scriptures themselves (from the nature of the language in which they were written, likewise according to the circumstances in which they were set down, and expounded in the light of like and unlike passages and of many and clearer passages) and which agree with the rule of faith and love, and contribute much to the glory of God and man’s salvation.” Second Helvetic Confession, 5.010*

*“The Bible is to be interpreted in the light of its witness to God’s work of reconciliation in Christ. The Scriptures, given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are nevertheless the words of men, conditioned by the language, thought forms, and literary fashions of the places and times at which they were written. They reflect views of life, history, and the cosmos which were then current. The church, therefore, has an obligation to approach the Scriptures with literary and historical understanding. As God has spoken his word in diverse cultural situations, the church is confident that he will continue to speak through the Scriptures in a changing world and in every form of human culture.” Confession of 1967, 9.29*

*“Yet the church, in obedience to Jesus Christ, is open to the reform of its standards of doctrine as well as of governance. The church affirms ‘Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda,’ that is, ‘The church reformed, always reforming,’ according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit.” G-2.0200*

*“Thus, the creeds and confessions of this church reflect a particular stance within the history of God’s people. They are the result of prayer, thought, and experience within a living tradition.” G-2.0500*

- G-6.0106b calcifies not only the Scripture, but also the confessions, ignoring our call to understand and apply them in context and to discern that interpretation which best agrees with the rule of faith and love.
- Numerous General Assemblies have declined overtures which would have defined “the essential tenets of the Reformed faith,” and yet G-6.0106b purports to make certain portions of the confessions – those that mention sin – authoritative in a way that the confessions themselves warn against. It changes our relationship to the confessions by requiring that officers be *in conformity* to them – an impossibility, since in some details the confessions are not even in conformity with each other – rather than being instructed and guided by them.

*“The new life takes place in a community in which men know that God loves and accepts them in spite of what they are. They therefore accept themselves and love others, knowing that no man has any ground on which to stand except God’s grace.*

*“The new life does not release a man from conflict with unbelief, pride, lust, fear. He still has to struggle with disheartening difficulties and problems. Nevertheless, as he matures in faith and faithfulness in his life with Christ, he lives in freedom and good cheer, bearing witness on good days and evil days, confident that the new life is pleasing to God and helpful to others.”*

*Confession of 1967, 9.22-23*

- God has given us responsibility for moral and ethical decision-making as we strive to bear witness to the reconciling work of Christ in the world. G-6.0106b trivializes the Christian calling by suggesting that faithfulness is dependent on a check-list of behaviors to avoid.

***“Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage of a man and a woman (W-4.9001), or chastity in singleness.”***

*“What does the seventh commandment teach us? 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.” Heidelberg Catechism, 4.108*

- 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*.
- Over a decade later, 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.”

***“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.”***

***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.***

*“We teach that baptism should not be administered in the Church by women or midwives. For Paul deprived women of ecclesiastical duties, and baptism has to do with these.” Second Helvetic Confession, 5.191*

*“The same Spirit... calls women and men to all ministries of the Church.” Brief Statement of Faith, 10.4*

- G-6.0106b raises legalism to a new level, and has enshrined in the *Book of Order* a literalism not of Scripture only, but also of the *Book of Confessions* – despite the fact that the confessions themselves warn against such treatment. The PC(USA) has rejected subscriptionism, as evidenced by its adoption of a *Book of Confessions* instead of one document only. As is true of the Scripture, the Confessions come to us from different periods in the church’s history and are sometimes contradictory in their details, such that conformity is impossible.

*“The sins forbidden in the Second Commandment are ... the making any representation of God, of all, or of any of the three Persons, either inwardly in our mind, or outwardly in any kind of image or likeness of any creature whatsoever...” Larger Catechism, 7.219; on the sinfulness of images of God, see also 4.096-098, 5.020-022, 7.051*

- There are hundreds of *practice[s]* 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.

*“We also confess that sins are not equal; although they arise from the same fountain of corruption and unbelief, some are more serious than others.” Second Helvetic Confession, 5.039*

- Standards are urgently needed - standards that will be taken seriously, not that invite being ignored or scoffed at. It is simply not possible to treat all sins equally. G-6.0106b makes what should be spiritual issues, to be dealt with pastorally and personally, into ecclesiastical inquiries and/or judicial cases.

*“Q. 149. Is any man able perfectly to keep the Commandments of God? A. No man is able, either of himself, or by any grace received in this life, perfectly to keep the Commandments of God; but doth daily break them in thought, word, and deed.” Larger Catechism, 7.259*

- In G-6.0106b the confessions have become no longer standards toward which to aspire, but *requirements* to meet “or else” – attaining the goal of perfection becomes a prerequisite for office, at least as the paragraph is written, though of course it has not enforced in that way, which undermines respect for the *Book of Order*. The church must maintain reasonable standards which are applied equally to all and determined in a way that respects freedom of conscience in interpretation of Scripture.

*“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.” G- 6.0108*

- Sessions and presbyteries can be trusted to make the decisions for which they are held accountable, and should be allowed to do so without the impossible burden of considering each and every *practice which the confessions call sin* as essential, or the hypocrisy of ignoring this sentence.

*“We confess and acknowledge that the law of God is most just, equal, holy, and perfect, commanding those things which, when perfectly done, can give life and bring man to eternal felicity; but our nature is so corrupt, weak, and imperfect, that we are never able perfectly to fulfill the works of the law. Even after we are reborn, if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth of God is not in us. It is therefore essential for us to lay hold on Christ Jesus, in his righteousness and his atonement, since he is the end and consummation of the Law and since it is by him that we are set at liberty so that the curse of God may not fall upon us, even though we do not fulfill the Law in all points. For as God the Father beholds us in the body of his Son Christ Jesus, he accepts our imperfect obedience as if it were perfect, and covers our works, which are defiled with many stains, with the righteousness of his Son. We do not mean that we are so set at liberty that we owe no obedience to the Law - for we have already acknowledged its place - but we affirm that no man on earth, with the sole exception of Christ Jesus, has given, gives, or shall give in action that obedience to the Law which the Law requires. When we have done all things we must fall down and unfeignedly confess that we are unprofitable servants. Therefore, whoever boasts of the merits of his own works or puts his trust in works of supererogation, boasts of what does not exist, and puts his trust in damnable idolatry.” Scots Confession, 3.15*

- Anyone who believes him or herself to be qualified for ordination/installation under G-6.0106b is indeed disqualified - for the sin of trusting in works rather than grace. Those endeavoring to require perfection of others are opening themselves to the grave temptation of

judgmentalism, condemned by Jesus Christ (e.g. Matthew 7:1-5), the Apostle Paul (e.g. Romans 14:1-12), and the confessions (e.g. 9.13). 08-B acknowledges that officers are called to high standards, but realistically.

*“Q. 60. How are you righteous before God? A. Only by true faith in Jesus Christ... “Q. 62. But why cannot our good works be our righteousness before God, or at least a part of it? A. Because the righteousness which can stand before the judgment of God must be absolutely perfect and wholly in conformity with the divine Law. But even our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin.” Heidelberg Catechism, 4.060, 4.062*

- The responsibility of every Christian is to strive to follow Jesus Christ in faith and reliance upon grace, not to reach for unattainable perfection and so delude him or herself that s/he has earned salvation. 08-B recognizes this journey without suggesting that anyone can reach perfect repentance in all aspects of life.

*“Q.113. What is required in the tenth commandment?*

*“A. That there should never enter our heart even the least indication or thought contrary to any commandment of God, but that we should always hate sin with our whole heart and find satisfaction and joy in all righteousness.” Heidelberg Catechism, 4.113*

*“But we rebel against God; we hide from our Creator.” Brief Statement of Faith, 10.3, line 33*

- Human sin is far deeper than *self-acknowledged practice*; indeed, self-deception, dishonesty, and hiding from God are grave aspects of our alienation from God. The specification *self-acknowledged* is an encouragement of dishonesty, and implies that sins which are not recognized or admitted are somehow less serious.

*“Repentance unto life is a saving grace, wrought in the heart of a sinner by the Word of God, whereby out of the sight and sense, not only of the danger, but also of the filthiness and odiousness of his sins, and upon the apprehension of God’s mercy in Christ to such as are penitent, he so grieves for, and hates his sins, as that he turns from them all to God, purposing and endeavoring constantly to walk with him in all the ways of new obedience.” Larger Catechism, 7.186*

- According to this definition, one cannot *repent* of a practice one does not consider to be wrong. A candidate might be willing to submit to the discipline of the church and give up a particular practice, yet s/he would still have not *repented* if his/her conscience was not persuaded that the practice is indeed sinful. Does this constitute *refusing to repent*? What has happened to freedom of conscience?

*“Congregations, individuals, or groups of Christians who exclude, dominate, or patronize their fellowmen, however subtly, resist the Spirit of God and bring contempt on the faith which they profess.” Confession of 1967, 9.44*

- G-6.0106b upholds an ideal of “purity” that, although it might be inadvertent, nevertheless has the effect of excluding, dominating, and patronizing those who are judged not to measure up. Jesus Christ consistently opted for compassion over such “purity.”

*“The power that Jesus Christ has vested in his church, a power manifested in the exercise of church discipline, is one for building up the body of Christ, not for destroying it, for redeeming, not for punishing. It should be exercised as a dispensation of mercy and not of wrath so that the great end of the church may be achieved, that all children of God may be presented faultless in the day of Christ.” Preamble, The Rules of Discipline*

*“The church in its witness to the uniqueness of the Christian faith is called to mission and must be responsive to diversity in both the church and the world. Thus the fellowship of Christians as it gathers for worship and orders its corporate life will display a rich variety of form, practice, language, program, nurture, and service to suit culture and need.*

*“Our unity in Christ enables and requires the church to be open to all persons and to the varieties of talents and gifts of God’s people...” G-4.0401, 4.0402*

*“It is necessary to the integrity and health of the church that the persons who serve in it as officers shall adhere to the essentials of the Reformed faith and polity as expressed in the Book of Confessions and the Form of Government. So far as may be possible without serious departure from these standards, without infringing on the rights and views of others, and without obstructing the constitutional governance of the church, freedom of conscience with respect to the interpretation of Scripture is to be maintained.” G-6.0108*

- The unity of the church is in Christ, not in a particular interpretation of Scripture or confessions, nor in uniform practice. In 1996 it was hoped that G-6.0106b would “settle the issue” of the ordination of lesbian and gay persons so that “the whole thing will go away.” However, it is clear from the more than 10 years of continual strife that the church is far from reaching consensus in this matter. Those Presbyterians whose consciences are persuaded that qualified gay men and lesbians should be considered for ordained office did not leave the church when G-6.0106b became part of the Book of Order, nor will they be silent until it is removed. Historically, insistence upon uniformity is inherently divisive; G-6.0106b, which heavy-handedly imposes a single exclusive view on everyone, has heightened rather than ended our conflict, exacerbated the brokenness of our community rather than healed it. The Presbyterian Church has been at its best when it has been willing to live with diverse interpretations of Scripture and the Constitution.