

Affirmation of Conscience Regarding G-6.0106b **Scott D. Anderson**

With this statement I declare to the Presbytery of John Knox my affirmation of conscience regarding article G-6.0106b of the PC (USA) Book of Order:

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.

This article has often been read as effectively excluding from consideration for ordained office gay and lesbian Christians in covenanted, lifelong partnerships. I do not believe this categorical exclusion is either biblical or faithful.

It is a serious step for me to affirm conscience in opposition to our church's ordination standards, and not something I undertake lightly. I am proceeding forward with this step with profound respect for those who affirm the current teaching of our church regarding ordination, and in the firm belief that my theological position and manner of life do not undermine the essential tenets of Reformed faith and polity.

1. We are created for relationship

Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper ('ezer) as his partner." (Gen. 2:18)

The opening chapters of Genesis remind us of the goodness of creation. But there is one aspect of the creation that God declares *not good*: human beings living in isolated loneliness, without a suitable companion. The text is not exclusionary; the possibility of relationship is God's good and gracious gift to *all* human beings, the result of divine discontent with the way things are in creation, and God's work in fashioning a "partner" to make things the way they ought to be as a sign of redemption.

The apostolic witness reminds us that Christians may also freely choose a life of singleness and life-long celibacy. I do not possess such a vocation; like most Christians, I am called to a life of partnership as described in Genesis. The Protestant Reformers argued strenuously on the basis of Scripture (e.g. Matt. 19:10-12, I Cor. 7:7-9) that it was unrealistic and unfaithful to impose a universal requirement of celibacy on an entire class of people (the clergy). The Larger Catechism forbids "entangling vows of single life" (7.249). I believe these arguments apply equally well to lesbian and gay believers, including those who are called to ordained ministry.

2: Marriage: The image of self giving love that unites Christ with the Church

For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church. (Eph. 5:31-32)

John Calvin teaches that we need to interpret the biblical commandments "with reference to the purpose of the Lawgiver" (Institutes II.viii.6). I believe the highest purpose intended by God for the

institution of marriage is summarized in Ephesians 5:31-32, which describes how the love and faithfulness characterizing the marital bond is to be a kind of icon or image of the redeeming, self-giving love that unites Christ with the church.

I believe life-long covenanted gay and lesbian partnerships can likewise arise from Christ's redeeming, self-giving love and serve as icons or images of that love to the world.

I believe that the biblical passages cited as prohibiting same-gender sexual expression (Gen. 19:1-29; Judges 19:1-30, Lev. 18:1-30, 20:1-27, I Cor. 6:9-17, I Tim. 1:3-13, Jude 1-25, and Rom. 1:26-27) were given with reference to the types of same-gender sexual activity that were prevalent in the ancient world. Such relationships functioned overwhelmingly as expressions of exploitation and power over inferiors or else were an aspect of sexual idolatry.

These forms of same-gender sexual expression familiar to the biblical writers were thus absolutely incompatible with the kind of sanctified, self-giving love that God intends as the purpose of the marital bond. Because of this, the biblical writers were obviously being faithful in portraying such relationships as disordered and incompatible with Christian discipleship. I do not believe, however, that a faithful reading of Scripture can responsibly treat covenanted, faithful lifelong gay and lesbian partnerships as being *the same thing* that the biblical writers rightly condemn.

God has blessed me with a faithful and loving partner who has been an integral part of my life for the past 19 years. In our life together we have sought to cultivate the kind of fidelity and love and self-giving that the Bible lifts up as God's loving intention for married couples.

Obviously our relationship is not identical to a heterosexual marriage in all respects, inasmuch as natural procreation is not an option for us. The Confession of 1967 affirms that marriage is not only for the purpose of procreation and child rearing, but also a "commitment to a mutually shared life" (9:47). In this regard, I would hope the church's pastoral stance towards us would be the same as it is toward heterosexual couples who are infertile or past the age of childbearing. Like many childless couples, my partner and I can find other ways to participate in the generative work of the Creator.

3. God's call to gay and lesbian Christians

Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality" (Acts 10:34)

I believe that the Holy Spirit is the giver of the deep faith, love and devotion to God exhibited by gay and lesbian believers who seek to live out God's call in the context of faithful, covenanted, life-long partnerships.

I believe that in giving these spiritual gifts to gay and lesbian believers, God acts in a manner consistent with the work of the Holy Spirit recorded in Acts 10, 11 and 15. The Holy Spirit revealed to the early church God's acceptance in Christ of an entire group of people—the Gentiles—who had been traditionally excluded from the community of faith. God's acceptance of this people included a calling to positions of leadership within the church.

4. The unfaithful consequences of categorical exclusion

I believe when the church categorically excludes people such as myself from consideration for ordination, the message it sends to gay and lesbian believers everywhere is that no matter how hard we might work and strive to conform our lives to the shape of the Gospel, we are disqualified on the basis of unchosen aspects of *who we are* from ever being able to respond to the call of God. This comes dangerously close, I believe, to telling gay and lesbian believers that Jesus Christ has nothing to offer people like me. As such it is the antithesis of the Gospel message I find proclaimed in the Scriptures, of a Savior who invites all to follow and to put their hope and trust in him.

5. The witness of the Confessions

The testimony of the Book of Confessions on same-gender relations is not entirely clear-cut. The English translation of the 1563 Heidelberg Catechism currently in use by the PC (USA) suggests that those guilty of “homosexual perversion” will not be saved (4.087). As recognized by the 2008 General Assembly of the PC (USA), however, this reference to homosexuality does not appear in the catechism as originally written, nor does it appear in any translation other than the one that appears in the Book of Confessions. The 2008 General Assembly has rightly called for a study to recommend a more accurate translation of this Catechism.

The 1647 Westminster Larger Catechism lists “sodomy, and all unnatural lusts” among a great many specific sins forbidden by the seventh commandment (4.087), but it is not at all clear that the term is directly transferable to contemporary discussions of same-gender relationships. In understandings of sodomy common in the 17th century, this sin would include any form of sexual expression that violates “nature’s aim” of procreation, including the use of artificial birth control.

Even if one assumes the direct applicability of these confessional statements to contemporary discussions, however, it is clear that the aim of the confessions as a whole is to echo the biblical witness, which condemns the exploitative and idolatrous same-gender behaviors that were predominant in the ancient world. I fully support our church’s confessions as they give voice to this biblical teaching. But I do not believe the behaviors referenced by these condemnations are the same thing as the faithful, covenanted, life-long same-gender partnerships that we see in today’s world among gay and lesbian Christians.

6. Summary

I affirm the authority of Scripture and our obligation as Christians to follow its teaching in all aspects of our lives, including our sexuality. I believe that all Christians are called to lives of holiness and faithfulness that glorify God and give concrete expression to our calling as followers of Christ. I affirm the pattern that Scripture sets out for sexual morality.

But I also believe that the categorical prohibition contained in G-6.0106b represents a grievous misapplication of biblical teaching in the case of gay and lesbian believers who are in faithful, covenanted, lifelong partnerships. For the reasons stated above, I believe this misinterpretation of the biblical witness is unfaithful to God’s loving intentions for humankind, and seriously undermines the church’s gospel witness to gay and lesbian persons. I cannot in Christian conscience support it.