

An Analysis

by the
Presbyterian Lay Committee

The Report of the Theological
Task Force on Peace, Unity
and Purity in the
Presbyterian Church (USA)

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Editor's Note

The Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity (USA) was created by the 213th General Assembly (2001) “to lead the Presbyterian Church (USA) in spiritual discernment of our Christian identity in and for the 21st century...” (Minutes, 2001, Part I, p. 29).

Its 20 members, comprised to reflect the theological and cultural diversity of the denomination, were directed to lead the Presbyterian Church (USA) in “spiritual discernment of our Christian identity, in and for the 21st century, using a process which includes conferring with synods, presbyteries, and congregations seeking the peace, unity and purity of the church. This discernment shall include but not be limited to issues of Christology, biblical authority and interpretation, ordination standards, and power.”

The task force released its final report September 15, 2005, and it will be considered June 15-22, 2006, by the 217th General Assembly when it meets in Birmingham, Alabama. It is available online at www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity.

This analysis of the task force’s report, prepared by the Presbyterian Lay Committee, examines, in turn, the theological and methodological, governance and polity considerations underlying the report. It then offers conclusions based on that examination.

The analysis includes references to line numbers in the task force’s report, so as to provide an easy-to-use format applicable as a study guide for individuals, small groups, sessions and presbyteries.

This analysis, and other resources, is included in the book, *Given and Sent in One Love: The True Church of Jesus Christ*, by Gerrit Scott Dawson and Mark R. Patterson. [The book can be ordered here.](#)



I. Theological and Methodological Considerations

“Peace if possible. Truth at all costs”

Martin Luther

A. The content of the task force report, when taken as a whole, violates a constitutional principle of church order; namely, that “no opinion can be either more pernicious or more absurd than that which brings truth and falsehood upon a level, and represents it as of no consequence what a man’s opinions are. On the contrary, we are persuaded that there is an inseparable connection between faith and practice, truth and duty. Otherwise, it would be of no consequence either to discover truth or to embrace it” (*Book of Order* G-1.0304).

- 1) The task force declares that it has found “unity” by engaging in a process wherein “we have come to respect the integrity with which theological views different from our own are held, and we have seen that many others in the church have the same capacity to perceive the biblical basis and Christian credibility of other perspectives” (line 1071).
- 2) The task force declares that, in its process of discernment, it has discovered how to be “moved and impressed by the depth and truth of statements made by our colleagues,” (line 399) and that it is able to affirm unity, even though its members “have not compromised our basic convictions or commitments” (line 414).
- 3) The task force recommends that “all parties should endeavor to outdo one another in honoring one another’s decisions ...” (line 1204).
- 4) The task force suggests that discerning between the truth and falsehood of contrasting positions should be disparaged as “fostering alienation” (lines 193-197).
- 5) The task force argues against debate, wherein contradictory

positions are identified. It calls this procedure “stereotyping” and “placing labels” (lines 342-382).

6) These statements and recommendations, replete throughout the report from beginning to end, reveal the essence of the task force’s methodology that it proffers to the church; namely, that a wide variety of “views,” “perspectives,” “theologies,” “core convictions,” – even mutually contradictory beliefs in which the affirmation of one would necessarily mean the denial of the other – can be affirmed, honored, respected, and held together within one ecclesiastical institution. This leads to the nonsensical proposition that any sincerely-held idea, however unscriptural it may be, is acceptable (“to be honored”).

B. The content of the task force report demonstrates that its conclusions – i.e., the primacy of institutional unity and its recommendations, and local option regarding “essential standards” – are grounded not in Scripture and the historic creeds and confessions that the task force report says it affirms, but in the various religious experiences of members of the task force. What is being affirmed *is not necessarily the fact that underlies an affirmation, but the person who makes the affirmation*. Thus, in affirming “Jesus is Lord,” the task force is not necessarily affirming the fact that Jesus is Lord, but celebrating the fact that some of its members who are loved and respected believe Jesus is Lord.

(1) Further complicating the matter, how one member defines “Lord” may be very different from the way another member defines that title. Jesus himself was clear on that point: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’ Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock” (Matthew 7:21-24).

(2) The task force abandons the clear word of Scripture when discussing “sexuality and ordination” (line 577 ff). Notice the source material that it cites:

a) “We explored a range of opinions on issues of human sexuality” (line 583). Here, the task force reveals that its source

is itself, its own individual and corporate opinions, forgetting Jesus' commendation to Peter: "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 16:17). The task force's "opinions" on the matter of human sexuality are mere expressions of flesh and blood, rather than the Word of God.

b) "Though we have shared some of our personal opinions and positions, we focused our studies primarily on the written work of Christian scholars and denominational commissions and assemblies. We read and discussed a diverse collection of theological and biblical writings on these topics. We benefited greatly from this way of grappling with issues and we commend it to the church" (lines 584-587). This is more flesh and blood.

c) Having surveyed the landscape, the task force expresses "surprise" at "how often writers on all sides of the questions bolstered their arguments with appeals to natural law (theological reasoning based on the orders of nature), which is not traditionally a central theme in Protestant theology" (footnote 21, page 16). Had the task force paid closer attention to Scripture, it might have noted that Romans 1 speaks of unnatural acts such as homoerotic behavior precisely in terms of the orders of creation. Historically, this Romans 1 theme has commanded a place of high honor in Protestant theology.

d) The task force finally concludes – contrary to the overwhelming testimony of Biblical scholarship through the ages – that "perspectives on questions of sexuality, ordination and same-gender covenantal relationships are rich and complex, and our fellow task force members who hold these views are sincere, faithful, and guided by Scripture" (lines 686-689). Thus, the task force suggests that "yes/no" answers to these complex matters be replaced with "both/and" answers, a solution that Scripture universally condemns.

3) In its reflections on Scripture, a part of the process in which the task force purportedly developed its conclusions, the members of the task force seriously misread Paul's letter to the Ephesians in drawing only from the first three chapters, which emphasize the unity of the church. This is an inappropriate use of Scripture that

violates historic Reformed principles of interpretation that, ironically, the task force specifies and affirms in another section of its report (lines 533-541).

a) Even in its reference to chapters 1-3, the task force abandons its initial and primary focus on the Triune God, who “chose us in him before the foundation of the world, *that we should be holy and blameless before him*” (Ephesians 1:4, emphasis added). Clearly, in this opening statement, Paul’s letter ties right faith to a righteous, moral pattern of living, a connection that the task force unfortunately has ignored. The task force report emphasizes unity, but avoids obedience.

b) After citing unity language – e.g., “For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances. ... So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God...,” (Ephesians 2:14-19) – the task force abandons reliance on Paul’s letter to the Ephesians.

c) The task force thereby misses the great “Therefore” in Chapter Four. The chapter begins by urging Christians “*to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called*” (Ephesians 4:1, emphasis added). It then proceeds to spell out the nature of this life to which we have been called: “Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that *you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do*, in the futility of their minds” (Ephesians 4:17, emphasis added), and: “*They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity*. But that is not the way you learned Christ! – assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to *put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness*” (Ephesians 4:19-24, emphasis added).

d) Finally, Paul brings the focus to the issue of sexual ethics: “But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among

saints. ... For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God” (Ephesians 5:3ff). Note that Paul *relates sexual immorality to idolatry, just as he does in the first chapter of Romans, wherein he specifies homosexual behavior as evidence of idolatry (the creature having assumed the role of the Creator)*.

C. The core of the task force’s “community-building” experiment is relational, a human process of mutual affirmation in which “loving” others involves affirming the integrity of their “core convictions” – even if one does not agree with those convictions and even if those convictions are contrary to Scripture. Thus, all propositions are regarded as true (in the eyes of those who affirm them) and none is false (as long as someone in the group affirms them as true). This postmodern worldview infects the entire report, *including its theological affirmations*, because it renders language meaningless, thereby throwing into question the very affirmations that the task force makes in the body of its report.

In the theological section of the report, for example, the task force affirms the Nicene Creed. Certainly, Christians who stand with the historic witness of the church applaud this affirmation, but in light of the task force’s postmodern assumptions and methodologies, the reader cannot be confident that he or she knows what the task force means when it affirms the Nicene Creed.

a) We recall, for example, that Professor Douglas Ottati – who affirms a Christ-concept, albeit not the Jesus Christ who is revealed in Scripture – says he can affirm the Nicene Creed as long as his is not “an ontological affirmation” (*Jesus Christ and Christian Vision*; Fortress Press; Minneapolis; 1989). But the creed’s declaration that Jesus Christ is “of one substance with the Father” becomes meaningless if it has no ontological reference. Clearly, Ottati is affirming *the language* of the creed, but *assigning a different meaning* to it.

b) By elevating abstractions and avoiding absolutes, the task force is able to arrive at a position in which each person in the group could affirm his or her own truth: “We have not compromised our convictions or commitments” (lines 413-414). Similarly, in line 422, the task force says “our respect for differing perspectives has deepened.” Herein, the task force demonstrates that its focus is *not on the proposition* (is it true or is it false?), *but on the person*

who holds it.

D. Peace, unity and purity are derivative, not primary values. Like happiness, they are not human achievements, but gifts to those who are in right relationship with the Triune God of grace, a relationship that encompasses both faith and “doing the will of the Father.”

The task force affirms this in principle: “our shared conviction that the church’s peace, unity, and purity are the results not of human efforts but rather of what God has given in Jesus Christ through the gracious work of the Spirit” (lines 474-476); but then proceeds to ignore what it affirms by seeking political solutions (negotiated acquiescence to divergent convictions) to the denomination’s theological/ethical dysfunction.

In this regard, we are reminded of Puritan theologian John Owen’s statement: “See in the meantime that your faith brings forth obedience and God in due time will cause it to bring forth peace.”¹

E. The task force lifts up the person of Jesus Christ, rightly affirming his full humanity and full divinity, but, in effect, ignores his Lordship and his requirements. This leads the task force to a truncated statement of faith that results in undefined ethical abstractions rather than the ethical particularity that is clearly revealed in the Word of God. Some of those abstractions are as follows:

1) The Lord’s Supper “dignifies our diversity, seals our unity, and even reverses our assumptions about our own and others’ acceptability” (lines 130-131). What is the meaning of “diversity” that the task force affirms in this statement? Is this national, racial, gender, or socio-political-economic class diversity? Or does this “diversity” include a range of behavior, including behavior that Scripture specifically proscribes? The task force does not tell us, leaving us to “dignify” a diversity that has no specific referent and, therefore, no meaning.

2) The task force includes in its report a section on “discipline,” in which it affirms the principle of “leading holy and disciplined lives” (line 220). But nowhere does the task force tell us what discipline means or how it is to be achieved. Notably missing is Scripture affirmed as the benchmark for determining the standard by which human action is assessed. Obedience to Jesus Christ and Biblical ethics is missing. Instead, we are given human values without any Scriptural definition as to what those values mean.

1. Owen, John; *The Complete Works of John Owen*; (Banner of Truth Trust; Edinburgh; 1996); Volume VI, “A Practical Exposition Upon Psalm 130.”

Examples in the report include “selflessness,” “piety,” “simplicity,” “self discipline,” “life of integrity,” and the pursuit of “faithful lives that do not “demonstrate licentious behavior” (line 661).

3) A discerning reader will spot the huge loophole in these abstractions, since one could argue that persons who engage in adultery or homoerotic activity, but do so with one rather than multiple partners, are living “faithful lives” that do not “demonstrate licentious behavior.” This argument, made publicly by some task force members prior to and during their service on the task force, is precisely what the 1991 General Assembly Task Force on Human Sexuality advocated in its recommendation that the denomination allow for homosexual behavior and some forms of heterosexual adultery. What the task force artfully avoids is the fact that, according to Scripture, *some behaviors are inherently wrong*, whether or not they are “faithfully” enacted.

4) The task force encourages Presbyterians to be engaged in “working for justice” (line 238). Nowhere in the document is justice defined. Is the “justice” that it envisions:

- a) commercial (as in giving a person his due);
- b) retributive or remedial (as in dealing with acts that offend societal standards);
- c) distributive (as in the proper allocation of the world’s resources);
- d) a synonym for righteousness, as the word often is employed in the Old Testament;
- e) a synonym for equality, a view that plays a central – and often unexamined – role in modern liberal thinking; or
- f) a code word for defining sexual relations, as in the “justice/love” mantra found in the 1991 Human Sexuality report, wherein sexual activities between consenting adults were regarded as “just” because no coercion was involved?

The task force does not answer these questions. Instead, it leaves us with an abstraction capable of multiple and often mutually exclusive definitions. For example, if a teacher gave identical grades to two students whose academic performance is substantially different, the teacher’s commitment to “equality” would, in this instance, be unjust.

In lines 250-256, the task force's concept of justice appears to take shape; namely the notion that justice somehow is associated with equality, the equal distribution of the world's resources.

We see this suggestion in its adulation of two liberationist documents, the Belhar Confession and the Korea declaration. These documents were employed in a call for the redistribution of property and power, justifying if necessary the use of force to achieve it. It was this view of justice that led the Presbyterian Church (USA) to support and fund terrorist Robert Mugabe's guerrilla war in Zimbabwe, and Marxist Daniel Ortega's dictatorship in Nicaragua.

5) The task force makes extensive use of categories – e.g., “liberal,” “conservative,” “progressive,” “evangelical,” “moderate,” etc. – with no clear definition or examination of these positions *per se*. Rather, the focus is only on “the pain” experienced by persons who are labeled and thereby excluded.

F. The process utilized in generating the report is proffered to the General Assembly as a model for replication among all governing bodies. This process, based on a group's self-consciousness rather than Scripture, is deeply flawed.

1) The task force declares: “This entire report has as its premise that a season of discernment is due in the church, one that all of the task force's recommendations are intended to support” (line 1497). The task force fails to recognize the fact that the Presbyterian Church (USA) has been actively engaged in sexuality discussions since the General Assembly meeting in 1976. For nearly 30 years, the denomination has been engaged in a “season of discernment.”

2) The task force recommends that all governing bodies engage in this “season of discernment” and “follow the example of the task force” in its “community building” and “collaborative effort” (line 1086). The purpose of discernment is to make a decision but, after years of using its form of “discernment,” the task force has arrived at no consensus and no decision. The task force admits that no member has changed his or her “core convictions.” Thus, one must conclude that the method of discernment chosen by this task force has been patently unsuccessful. On what basis should the church replicate this documented failure?

3) The task force affirms that it was directed “to devise ‘an instru-

ment and a process' by which means the church can discern and discuss matters that unite and divide it" (lines 1093-1094). Throughout its "process," however, the task force has failed to frame a single issue to be discerned. What are the questions that it calls on the church to discern? Nothing concrete appears in the task force's report or recommendations.

II. Governance and Polity Considerations

The task force report's proposed recommendation #5, set forth in lines 1176-1450, would violate the Constitution of the PC(USA).

Recommendation #5 proposes that the General Assembly adopt an authoritative interpretation of G-6.0108 in the *Book of Order* that would allow a governing body to decide whether an explicit constitutional standard is an “essential of the Reformed faith and polity” to which the presbytery must yield.

A. The task force recommendation would repeal the Authoritative Interpretation already issued by the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission that states the relation of G-6.0106b and G-6.0108; namely, that G-6.0106b overrides any ordaining body’s discretion in determining standards for the sexual behavior of persons to be ordained.

Although the recommendation says it does not intend to “change” either G-6.0106b or the Authoritative Interpretation of 1978 that preceded G-6.0106b (lines 1347-1350), the report immediately goes on to how that provision of the constitution could be determined by an ordaining body as not being applicable if it so chose (lines 1359-1362).

1) The task force tries to justify this overruling of a constitutional standard by a governing body on the grounds that the relationship between G-6.0108 and “other” sections of the *Book of Order* “has become unclear” (lines 1256-57). The two examples of confusion it gives are that “some” governing bodies say they have the right to overlook “certain” churchwide standards, while “some interpreters” insist that the provisions of the Constitution that govern sexual behavior supersede the right of installing bodies to decide the fitness of candidates for ordination (lines 1257-1262). These opposing viewpoints presented as rationale do exist, but the church has clearly spoken numerous times over the years and said

that the former opinion claiming the right to overlook homosexual behavior is wrong and that the latter understanding is correct. It is not that confusion exists; rather, it is that some people refuse to acquiesce to the authority of the larger church.

2) The most recent declaration is the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission ruling in *Londonderry Presbyterian Church v. Presbytery of Northern New England* (decided in July 2000, reported to the 2002 General Assembly). That ruling specifically states that there is no contradiction between G-6.0108 (the section the task force's recommendation wants to "interpret") and G-6.0106b (the standard that supersedes the discretion of governing bodies on matters of sexual behavior). The presbytery in that case argued that, "G-1.0301a and G-6.0108 affirm freedom of conscience with respect to matters addressed by G-6.0106b." The General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission rejected that assertion, saying that tensions between provisions are to be resolved to give effect to all provisions. The ruling went on to say that G-6.0106b is a qualification established by the whole church, and that the constitution allowed the church to declare the qualifications of its ministers and members. No governing body or judicial commission may declare a properly adopted provision of the Constitution to be invalid, the ruling said, adding: "The only appropriate avenue to change or remove a provision of the *Constitution* is through the process for amendment provided within the *Constitution* itself."

3) The Permanent Judicial Commission then spent some paragraphs in its ruling exploring the paradox of Christian liberty within the covenant church community. It explored our Reformed tradition, which permits a person to hold ideas that contravene a provision of the constitution, but forbids the person from doing an act violating the provision. The decision points to G-6.0108 as echoing those very principles and condemns a declaration by a governing body "not to comply with the *express corporate judgment* of the Church in an explicit *constitutional provision*..." (emphasis added).

4) The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) provides two ways for an authoritative interpretation to be rendered – by the General Assembly or through a decision of the Permanent Judicial Commission (*Book of Order* G-13.0103r). If the interpretation proposed by the task force were adopted, it would repeal the

Londonderry case, since the “most recent interpretation” of a provision is binding.

[Two famous cases on “essential” ordination standards are those of *Maxwell v. Presbytery of Pittsburgh* (UPCNA Minutes, 1975, p. 254) and *Rankin v. National Capital Union Presbytery* (UPCNA Minutes, 1981, p.113). They are of interest in setting out the constitutional understanding of presbytery discretion and its limits in ordination, but their holdings are not directly applicable to G-6.0108 or G-6.0106b, as both of those sections were adopted after 1983.]

B. The task force recommendation would violate the understanding of the constitutional process for change reached by the Special Commission of 1925 with respect to setting ordination standards.

If the substance of the G-6.0106b prohibition were embodied solely in a case of the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission or the Authoritative Interpretation of 1993 without a constitutional section, Recommendation #5 would not violate the Constitution. That, however, is not the case. G-6.0106b is part of the Constitution, and the task force recommendation would violate the Constitution.

1) The task force report mentioned a number of controversies about the understanding of ordination in Presbyterian history. It failed, however, to explore or apply the most recent and *still-controlling* episode.

In the 1920s, a major controversy erupted in the United Presbyterian Church (USA) (the northern branch from the 1861 split until its 1983 reunion with the Presbyterian Church US to form the present Presbyterian Church (USA)). The General Assembly had adopted interpretations of doctrines in 1910, 1916 and 1923, setting out particular understandings such as the virgin birth of Jesus, the inerrancy of Scripture, the substitutionary nature of atonement, and the bodily resurrection of Jesus and declared them to be essential standards. Within six months of the 1923 General Assembly action, 1,274 ministers had signed the Auburn Affirmation protesting that action as unconstitutional. The signers argued that the only process that could legally bind the church on doctrine was one that amended the Constitution, which required the concurrence of the presbyteries.

At the 1925 General Assembly, commissioners overruled the Presbytery of New York’s approval of two men for ordination as ministers. On the basis of the 1923 interpretation of essentials, the

General Assembly held that their failure to affirm the virgin birth of Jesus prevented their qualifying for office (*Gantz v. Synod of New York, re Henry P. Van Dusen and Cedric A. Lehman*, minutes, 1925, p. 83). At that same assembly, a Special Commission was appointed to study and report on “the present spiritual condition of our Church and the causes making for unrest ... that the purity, peace, unity, and progress of the Church may be assured.”

The commission, chaired by Henry C. Swearingen, made a final report to the 1927 General Assembly. The report focused on this question: “What authority, if any, does the General Assembly possess for declaring any article to be an essential and necessary one in a sense which renders its statement mandatory and applicable to all cases?” (Minutes, 1927, p. 78).

In answering, the commission pointed out certain facts:

- a) The Adopting Act of 1729 provided for the decision of essential articles to be made in specific cases, not for the authority to adopt exact language for application rigidly in each case;
- b) Before the adoption of the Constitution in 1789, the (General) Synod was co-equal in authority with the Presbytery, so actions before 1789 do not definitely settle current questions; and
- c) The matter to which an article is “essential” is to a system of doctrine taught in Scriptures, not to salvation or citizenship in the Kingdom.

The commission then distinguished the powers of the assembly to make general interpretations versus making judicial decisions in a particular case. It said that the “General Assembly has an undoubted right to interpret the Constitution in declaratory deliverances” on what are essential and necessary articles to bear witness to the corporate faith of the Church. Nevertheless, the commission cautioned against such interpretations: “the exercise of the right may lead, as experience has shown, to disturbing results. ... [M]ost of the ministers and members of our Church will agree that the risk of such action is great, and that the General Assembly may well refrain from taking such a course, *especially as it may be misconstrued as a virtual amending of our organic law by another method than that prescribed by the Constitution*” (Min-

utes, 1927 p. 81; emphasis added).

When a specific case about an individual's doctrinal beliefs comes before the General Assembly in its judicial capacity, however, the commission said the assembly could not rest on the declaratory deliverance of a former assembly. No, "[a] judicial decision is grounded in the Constitution itself and derives its chief additional support from similar decisions arrived at in the same manner and resting upon the same foundation."

Furthermore, the commission said, if the assembly had the authority to broadly declare an article to be essential, commissioners would have to quote the exact language of the article as it appears in the [Westminster] Confession, not using paraphrases or inferences from the confession.

The commission concluded that these clear principles had served the denomination well for the last 200 years and should continue to be followed to serve its peace, purity and unity. Its report was adopted unanimously, and often has been referred to in church discussions and judicial decisions as determinative of the issue that explicit ordination standards can be set only by constitutional amendment. In *Rankin v. National Capital Union Presbytery* (Minutes, 1981, p. 113), the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission referred to the report of the Special Commission of 1925 and said, "It is now considered the authoritative statement of these constitutional principles" (Minutes, 1981, p. 114).

2) The understanding expressed by the report was the basis in 1996 for seven of the 15 members of the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission declaring that the 1978 Authoritative Interpretation that homosexual behavior barred a person from ordination was unconstitutional. In the case of *Central Presbyterian Church v. Presbytery of Long Island*, Remedial Case 208-4 (Minutes, 1996), the seven judicial commissioners argued that the Permanent Judicial Commission itself had erred in its decision in *Union Presbyterian Church of Blasdell* (Minutes, 1985, p.121) and subsequent cases. The commissioners' minority opinion stated that the Permanent Judicial Commission had been wrong in treating the 1978 statement as though it were a properly enacted amendment to the Constitution. Alluding to G-6.0108a in the *Book of Order*, their opinion said that the 1978 guidance could not be considered an "essential" of the Reformed faith and polity,

but “a detail on which reasonable people within the Reformed tradition may have honest differences of opinion.”

3) It is within the clear memory of many people now in the denomination that the near-majority opinion of the *Central Presbyterian Church* case to reverse the *Blasdell* decision upholding the 1978 Definitive Guidance was the impetus to propose a constitutional amendment setting sexual behavior standards for ordination. The *Central Presbyterian Church* case was decided in October 1995; G-6.0106b was proposed to the 1996 General Assembly and sent out by it to the presbyteries. Opponents on both sides of the debate acknowledged that the amendment’s effect would be to set a denomination-wide standard that would bind local ordaining bodies.

4) If the Authoritative Interpretation recommended by the task force were adopted, it would be doing the very thing that was the defect attributed to the 1978 Authoritative Interpretation – *trying to effect change in ordination standards by an authoritative interpretation without using the required constitutional process of an amendment sent to the presbyteries*. Moreover, it would be trying to nullify a clear standard already in place in the constitution and voted on three times in the past nine years. The task force report seeks to elevate the Authoritative Interpretation of Recommendation #5 to a change in the text of the constitution by a process that violates the constitution.

C. The task force recommendation would adopt a “presumption of wisdom” in favor of the ordaining body that would be all but impossible to be overcome in any review by higher governing bodies (lines 1199-1206). Thus, in reality, the decision of the ordaining body regarding whether a standard was an “essential” would be final.

1) Lines 1199-1201 in the task force report set out the aspects of the ordaining decision that a higher governing body would be limited to review – whether the examination was conducted “reasonably, responsibly, prayerfully, and deliberately.” The actual *correctness* of the determination is trumped by the *manner* of the determination.

2) As stated in *Simmons v. Presbytery of Suwannee* (Minutes 1985, p. 114), “appellants must overcome a substantial weight of authority that grants broad discretion to the presbytery in [ordination] matters.” In fact, most of the cases say that “higher judicatories

should substitute their judgment only for the most extraordinary reasons” (*Rankin*, p. 115), and limit inquiry to whether the record contained sufficient evidence to support the presbytery’s action. The language in lines 1203-1206 of the task force’s report highlighting the “presumption of wisdom” would make such a high hurdle for the evidence to be overcome as to be almost impossible.

D. The task force recommendation would allow the standards of sexual behavior based on at least 2,000 years of Biblical understanding to be violated by ordaining bodies pending an indeterminate process of discernment (lines 1353-1356).

1) The standard of fidelity in marriage and chastity in singleness that G-6.0106b in the *Book of Order* prescribes is derived from the Scriptures and has been upheld by the Church Universal as true since the birth of the Church at Pentecost. *The Book of Confessions* of the Presbyterian Church (USA) explicitly proffers that standard in at least four of its documents.

2) It is shocking that the task force could propose tolerating the abrogation of those standards “while the debate continues,” which it recognizes may be “many years.” The damage that would be done to the name of Jesus Christ and to individuals by condoning such sexual license in the “meantime” while the “discernment” continues is incalculable.

E. The task force recommends that the General Assembly “direct” and “urge” governing bodies to “explore the use of alternative forms of discernment and decision-making ...” (line 1150). This recommendation is tantamount to a de facto amendment to the *Book of Order*.

1) In the body of its report, the task force finds favor with non-parliamentary methodologies that “seek constructive, Christ-like alternatives to the ‘yes/no’ forms in which questions about sexuality, ordination, and same-gender covenantal relations have been put to the church in recent decades” (line 689).

2) The task force declares that “in strategies that offer win-lose options only ... we alienate ourselves from one another,” and suggests that, in requiring that clear-cut choices be made, “we deny the gift of the grace of God” (lines 191-194).

3) In *Time for Truth*,¹ theologian Os Guinness speaks directly to

1. Guinness, Os; *Time for Truth: Living Free in a World of Lies, Hype & Spin*; (Hourglass Books; Grand Rapids, Mich.; 2000); p. 110.

the task force's aversion to "yes/no" decisions. Guinness says that the ultimate undeniability of truth always confronts us with two choices: "Either we conform the truth to our desires or we conform our desires to the truth." Continuing his commentary, Guinness said, "Kiekegaard was so committed to the responsibility of this choice that he was nicknamed 'Either/Or.' 'I who am called Either/Or,' he once said, 'cannot be at the service of anybody with both/and.'"

4) The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) makes the following requirement: "Meetings of governing bodies, commissions, and committees shall be conducted in accordance with the most recent edition of *Robert's Rules of Order*, except in those cases where this Constitution provides otherwise" (G.9.0302).

(a) In mandating parliamentary procedure (note the word "shall"), the Constitution recognizes that civilized debate according to established rules of engagement is a tried-and-true method for giving all positions a fair hearing, testing arguments, discerning the truth, and achieving a binding decision.

b) The task force's nurturing of friendships is commendable on a personal level. It may be an excellent model for personal relations if it can be followed in small group settings without forcing participants to conform to a consensus that denies what the Bible clearly affirms.

c) History, however, provides no evidence that small-group consensus methodologies have been successful in large-group settings. Beyond the level of intimate association, interpersonal relationship methodologies breed chaos, and the body politic is rendered unable to make just and binding decisions. This state-of-nature reality has led many civilized cultures to incorporate some form of parliamentary procedure into the discernment and decision-making process.

III. Conclusion

The task force report and its recommendations should be rejected *in toto*. The process utilized in generating this report (and offered to the General Assembly as a model for replication among all governing bodies) and the report itself is made of whole cloth. Were the General Assembly to adopt or approve this report, it would align the Presbyterian Church (USA) not only with a particular document, but with the process that produced it. In offering itself as a model, the task force has declared that its process and product are inseparable.

The task force's methodology and the ideological assumptions that underlie it substitute the self for Scripture. Admittedly, those who read the report from the perspective of a Biblical worldview can find acceptable statements scattered therein. But lifting isolated phrases piecemeal from this whole-cloth document would produce a tattered and incoherent product, certainly nothing from which the denomination can discern the mind of Christ.

The task force report invites replacement, not repair. That replacement must begin at the beginning, with the revealed Word of God. Aside from that Word, we cannot have substance, because "all things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made" (John 1:1). To anchor the report in the experience of self – albeit a corporate self comprised of friendly and well-meaning people – constitutes an exercise that is unworthy of Christ's Church.

The task force's replacement must follow Scripture from beginning to end, from a Biblical theology to the ethic that flows logically, necessarily and consistently out of that theology. Admittedly, this congruity will cause discomfort, "pain," and a sense of exclusion for those who will not live according to God's Word. Exposed to the language of a therapeutic culture, we can understand the task force's decision to avoid this pain. Scripture and our own experience, however, teach us that pain can be providential. It can move us to repentance that leads to restoration and righteous living.

Loving others does not require affirming their opinions or convictions if such are unscriptural, unethical, or harmful to themselves or society. Loving others by listening to their convictions is an appropriate model for human relationships, but governance and leadership require discernment and judgment as to what is true or false, right or wrong.

Replacing a report that was years in the making might be regarded by some as an impossible task. Certainly, if one were to repeat the task force's error by beginning again to forge another consensus among radically diverse ideologies and lifestyles, success would be (and should be) impossible.

But with God, all things are possible. The key to this more hopeful future is the phrase "with God." He can do for the Presbyterian Church (USA) what no task force can do. He does not begin where we are, but where he is; and, by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ in the power of his Holy Spirit, that is exactly where he invites us to be.

In *The Pursuit of God*, A.W. Tozer¹ describes how the many diverse instruments of an orchestra achieve unity. They do not discover the right tone by conferring with one another. Instead, the pitch of each instrument is adjusted in relation to one true tone, a tuning fork. It is in congruence with that single standard that they find their way to one another. Therein lies a parable for those who would seek the peace, unity and purity of the Church.

*"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever."*²

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1. Tozer, A.W.; *The Pursuit of God: The Human Thirst for the Divine*; (Christian Publications; Harrisburg, Pa.; 1994).
 2. Isaiah 40:8.