

Peace, Unity, and Purity?

**Reflections on the
Theological Task
Force Report**

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For information, address Geneva Press,
100 Witherspoon Street, Louisville, Kentucky 40202-1396.

ISBN-13: 978-0-664-50292-8
ISBN-10: 0-664-50292-X

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Publisher's Note

The Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church was created by the 213th General Assembly (2001) in a denominational context of polarization. Various factions within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) viewed one another with suspicion, anger, and disdain.

The more conservative elements in the church were intent upon maintaining the current ordination standards. They were also concerned about a lack of clarity on the part of their more liberal colleagues about the uniqueness of Jesus Christ in doctrinal formulations.

The more liberal wing of the church longed for a more inclusive set of provisions in the *Book of Order* that would permit gays and lesbians to serve in positions of church leadership. They were also less concerned about affirmations concerning the centrality of Christ than with issues of justice and the church's witness in the world.

In this context, the task force's assignment seemed to many observers tantamount to "mission impossible." Nevertheless, the task force met for prayer, Bible study, and reflection on the history and beliefs of the Reformed tradition and, despite all their pronounced differences, emerged as a community of faith in which the Holy Spirit was perceived to be at work.

The final report of the task force is now before the church for consideration leading up to the upcoming General Assembly in Birmingham this June. (Copies of the report may be procured via www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity/.)

In the pages that follow, you are invited to engage this process of consideration via the ruminations of three leaders of the church. It is my hope that these essays will prove edifying as you contemplate the task force report and endeavor for yourself to come to terms with its conclusions. It is also to be hoped that these essays will contribute to the broader conversation across the PC(USA) about the peace, unity, and purity that are so urgently needed in the Presbyterian Church.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Davis Perkins".

Davis Perkins
President and Publisher



Price H. Gwynn III, Moderator of the 202nd General Assembly (1990) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), is the son and grandson of Presbyterian ministers and became a successful businessman as well as an extremely effective elder of the Presbyterian Church. Prior to his election as moderator, this North Carolina native

was vice president and director of Lance, Inc., having previously served as president of two other major companies. After being elected, Gwynn became the only moderator of our denomination to be featured in *The Saturday Evening Post* for his extensive business experience. Such experience prepared him to serve as chairman of the board of Presbyterian Publishing Corporation during an important time of transition. Gwynn served on the board from 1993 to 2001.

His experience and leadership at all levels of the Presbyterian Church are equally impressive. Gwynn has served as deacon, elder, Sunday school teacher, and synod representative and has held extensive presbytery committee assignments, as well as acting as moderator of his presbytery. He was awarded five honorary degrees from Presbyterian colleges, including Davidson, where he also served on the board of trustees. During his distinguished career, he chaired the board of Presbyterian Hospital in Charlotte, and he was an active member of the board of trustees of Union Theological Seminary in Richmond.

Further national church leadership roles include former membership on the General Assembly Council, the Committee on the Spiritual Welfare of the Church, and the Special Committee for Review of the General Assembly. Gwynn has combined all of these activities with a distinguished military career, outstanding civic service, and, with his wife, Katherine, strong family ties with their three sons and their grandchildren.

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Come, Let Us Reason Together

A Response to the Final Report of the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church



Cynthia M. Campbell

Humanity has long found beauty, stability, and utility in things that come in threes. Much art and architecture relies on the basic geometric form of a triangle. Dynamic patterns of threes delight and amaze: the mystery of basketball's triangle offense; the fluid beauty of baseball's double play; the sheer joy of a waltz. Christian life is rooted in the triune being of God. But triads can also be constructed in ways that produce tension and conflict. Those ordained and installed to office in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) take an oath "to further the peace, unity, and purity of the church." In recent years, these have come to feel like competing and almost mutually exclusive aspects of the church's life. The Theological Task Force has produced a report designed to help us find a way to hold these three in dynamic and creative tension. The purpose of this essay is to discuss how well they have succeeded.

Before proceeding to a discussion of the text of the report, it is worth spending some time thinking about how we should approach this text. On the one hand, it can be read as a document to be dissected and critiqued. Individual words and phrases can be examined for their precise meaning. The way theological statements are made can be judged against various standards of orthodoxy. Interpretations of the *Book of Order* can be argued differently. Much of what has been published about the report thus far has come from those who want to retain standards that prohibit the ordination of gay and lesbian members and from those who want those standards changed. Both groups have engaged primarily in analysis that focuses on critique of what they think is lacking or objectionable in the report and its recommendations.

Another way to read the report is to examine it for wisdom by which we, the church, might be instructed as we move forward. This way of reading suggests that we approach the document with other questions. Rather than asking whether or not the task force has given the "right answers," we might ask: What can we learn from this? Where do we find ideas that



cohere with our theological perspectives and church experience? In what ways have the resources of the tradition been presented in new and helpful ways? What aspects of the Scripture or tradition have been overlooked or not given sufficient emphasis?

To approach the document in this way is to engage it in the kind of conversation that the writers say has led to their conclusions. The analysis may not produce as many sound bites or something as simple as a thumbs-up or thumbs-down judgment. But it is much more likely to lead to the kind of engagement in which both critique and appreciation can be expressed in ways that invite dialogue rather than continuing the polarization the report is designed to avoid.

This second approach allows us to hear the task force when it summarizes its own experience: “The task force, diverse in its makeup, has gained some *practical wisdom* about what is required for unity while important differences remain” (lines 956–957, emphasis added). What they mean by this is that rather than discovering clear answers or straightforward solutions, they have discerned “valuable resources that may allow those who hold different positions on important issues to maintain the bonds of Christian fellowship, respecting both the will of majorities and the conscience of minorities in a spirit of charity and mutual forbearance” (lines 623–626).

One resource they discovered was one another. In other eras, if the church wished to produce a report that would offer wise counsel, it would have selected the “elders” of the community—literally those of long experience, seasoned judgment, and great prominence. In our day, another paradigm is followed, namely drawing together a group of people with similar characteristics but who also represent the diversity of our church: people who are young and older, scholars and pastors and church members, those who are widely known and those who are not, as well as those already identified with various points of view on the issues at hand—trusting that out of this mix and with the active presence of the Holy Spirit, a way forward would come. Some of the most moving and significant parts of the report are the places where the task force bears witness to the importance of their work together, learning to value the faith, commitment, and integrity of all involved. They write, “The task force is convinced that differences [of opinion] represented within its own membership result from attempts on all sides to be faithful to the Word of God given in Scripture” (lines 645–646).

Only if the church as a whole is able to come to that conviction will we truly find our way through the current debates.

Another resource that the task force had was time to be together as a community and to engage seriously and carefully in the time-honored Christian practices of Bible study, prayer, table fellowship (including the Eucharist), and conversation. One of the ironies of modern church life is that these disciplines are in short supply, and their absence from the life of governing bodies where difficult issues are under consideration is even more striking. While the church as a whole will not be able to replicate the four-year life of the task force, adopting their recommendations for commitment to one another and to disciplines of prayer and study together is clearly a step that can lead to renewed life for the church.

Part of what has taken so long for the task force to complete its work was their decision early on to ground themselves together in the study of Scripture, Christian tradition, and our Reformed theological heritage. The result of this decision is the lengthy theological affirmation with which the report opens. It is to be studied, as they rightly point out, “not as a finished or perfect product, but as a starting point” (line 1015). Drawing on resources both traditional and contemporary, this section is testimony to how much a very diverse group of Presbyterians discovered they shared in terms of common faith. To dismiss this as least-common-denominator or watered-down theology can be done only by those who believe that there is only one “right” way to state the core convictions of the Christian faith and that the task force has failed to use the “correct” formulae. This section deserves much more careful attention both in terms of affirmation and critique of the task force’s work.

One of the most substantive and carefully written parts of the report discusses the ways in which the task force discerned resources within our Presbyterian history and tradition especially as that relates to governance. Here the task force provides some of its most helpful work by opening up the pages of the history of Presbyterianism in America and noting the ways in which our polity has developed in part out of confronting other divisive and controversial issues in the past. Polity, the report rightly points out, is best understood as the implementation of theological values and commitments as the church attempts to govern itself and shape its life together. When I taught Presbyterian polity, I attempted to help students see that if one understands the theological





foundations outlined in the first few chapters of the *Book of Order*, it is fairly easy to imagine what the specific “rule” will be in a specific situation.

According to the task force, the uniqueness of Presbyterian polity is to be found in the balance or equilibrium that is achieved between principles that might seem to be at odds with one another. They conclude that “when held in *constructive tension*, these points of balance have allowed Presbyterians to live in relative concord while engaged in vigorous debate and faithful ministry. When equilibrium between these shared theological commitments collapses, however, disagreements have been difficult to resolve, and ruptures in our communion have sometimes resulted” (lines 694–698, emphasis added). For example, Presbyterians have long believed that the Holy Spirit guides governing bodies to discern God’s will for the church. *At the same time*, we believe that governing bodies (what the Westminster Confession calls “church councils”) can and do make errors, so we also affirm that “God alone is Lord of the conscience” as individuals seek to discern God’s will in Scripture (lines 700–701). Presbyterian church life does not follow one or the other of these principles; it seeks to follow and live out both at the same time.

It is this set of principles in tension that leads to another: namely, the idea that the church can determine what beliefs and practices are *essential* for the church’s identity and integrity to be preserved *and* the conviction that the views of individuals on *nonessential* ideas and practices should be respected (lines 713–714). While the report itself does not elaborate, a review of Presbyterian history makes clear that the church has struggled repeatedly with this notion of “essential” vs. “nonessential” and has been very reluctant to produce definitive lists.¹

The place where this distinction occurs most frequently is in the matter of ordination. Here again, there are principles in tension: the rights of governing bodies with “original jurisdiction” and the rights of those who have the power of review (lines 760–761). For example, congregations have the right (and responsibility) to elect those whom they believe God has called as elders and deacons, and the session has the responsibility to examine them as to their suitability for office.

1. For a full discussion, see “Principles of Polity: Their Contribution to the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Presbyterian Church,” by Milton J. Coalter, Barbara G. Wheeler, and John Wilkinson, available at www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity.



At the same time, the presbytery has the responsibility to assure that the congregation and session are exercising these rights and responsibilities within the provisions adopted by the church as a whole regarding church officers.

It is the discernment of these “complementary commitments” and the need for maintaining a dynamic equilibrium among them that form the foundation for the task force’s Recommendation 5, a new authoritative interpretation that reaffirms that standards for ordination and installation are set forth in the *Book of Confessions* and the Form of Government *and* that it is the responsibility of ordaining and installing governing bodies to determine whether a specific candidate “has departed from scriptural and constitutional standards for fitness for office.” In particular, the body is to determine whether any such departure “constitutes a failure to adhere to the essentials of Reformed faith and polity under G-6.0108” (lines 1060–1065). The task force admits that this is simply a reaffirmation of what is already in the *Book of Order*. By calling the church as a whole to a rigorous application of these principles, the task force argues that we may find our way forward on difficult matters of ordination.

Those who wish to see G-6.0106b removed from the *Book of Order* and a formal statement that gay and lesbian persons are eligible to be considered for ordination and installation to office are understandably disappointed. Those who think that this recommendation is the equivalent of a so-called local option (where each session and presbytery can do what they want) are simply wrong. Governing bodies that ordain and install are obliged to determine the suitability of each individual for office in accordance with the standards that currently apply, which includes (among other things) G-6.0106b (which still requires *all* officers to repent of *anything* “the confessions call sin”).

A number of questions arise. What will this mean in practice? Each session and presbytery will need to engage in serious conversation about how it understands what is “necessary” or “essential” and where persons of good conscience and integrity can disagree in matters of faith and practice. This is not to be done only in the abstract, however. As the report suggests, a session or presbytery will need “to gain the broadest visions of each officer-elect’s faith manner of life, and promise as it applies standards and makes decisions about essentials” (lines 1159–1161). Good judgments are likely to be made best when looking at the lives and convictions of



potential officers as a whole. One way to put the question will be: can this person lead and serve as a good Presbyterian in light of the views he or she holds or way of life he or she follows? Put another way: are the views or practices of this person seriously out of conformity with what the session or Presbytery (made up of those who have promised to be guided by Scripture and the Confessions) believes is essential to Presbyterian life? The governing bodies that exercise review are urged by this authoritative interpretation to accord “the presumption of wisdom to ordaining/installing bodies” (line 1070), but those bodies are reminded as well that their decisions are always subject to review, that they are accountable to the church as a whole.

The great promise of this recommendation is that it draws on the polity of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and on our history as a denomination in this country to find a way to maintain the peace, unity, and purity of the church at this time. The solution they suggest will probably require most ordaining bodies to work harder than they do, but it is likely that all who participate in these decisions will end up thinking much more deeply about Christian faith and Presbyterian life.

The problem is whether this authoritative interpretation is more than an interim solution to the specific questions of ordination and human sexuality. In the section of the report that addresses this issue (lines 509–610), the task force shares insights gained through their study but finally concludes that “the church should seek constructive, Christ-like alternatives to the ‘yes/no’ forms in which questions about sexuality, ordination, and same-gender covenantal relationships have been put to the church in recent decades” (lines 605–607). This approach will of necessity mean more study, conversation, and discernment as the church seeks to understand these issues in light of Scripture, Christian tradition, and experience. This will not be acceptable to those who are convinced that Scripture and tradition clearly and unequivocally consider homosexual practice incompatible with Christian life and faith. A call for further time of discernment is also not acceptable to those who want a blanket affirmation of homosexuality without any discussion about how to live in accord with Christian norms of fidelity, responsibility, and integrity. But for the rest of the church, which falls somewhere in between these ends of the spectrum of views, there is more to be learned, and a way toward constructive engagement that does not divide the church will be welcomed.

One final word with respect to the task force’s suggestion about exploring “the use of alternative forms of discernment and decision-making as a complement to parliamentary procedure, especially in dealing with potentially divisive issues” (lines 1025–1027). This has been widely criticized as an abandonment of the constitutional requirement of *Robert’s Rules of Order* even though the report makes it clear that such means are suggested as supplements to rather than replacements for formal debate and voting. In point of fact, smaller bodies such as sessions regularly operate in this way—engaging in conversation and often reaching consensus before formulating motions for vote. If the point of deliberation in a Presbyterian governing body is “to discern the mind of Christ” rather than to vote along predetermined “party lines,” then providing spaces within the meeting of a body for genuine conversation (speaking, listening, and reflection) would seem to be a wise and constructive suggestion.

We can all be grateful to the task force, to twenty dedicated and faithful members of the Presbyterian Church who have brought us this document. They have reminded us that peace, unity, and purity are all gifts of God, all three marks of the church, and have shown us a way toward experiencing them in our life together. Their work deserves prayerful consideration in a spirit of openness and in anticipation that we might be led into deeper faithfulness to Christ as a result.





Saying “Yes” to God

Thomas C. Sheffield



There is a crowd around me. It isn't the first time, of course, that a crowd of voices and faces has appeared. They come each time I speak or write about the issues raised in the Report of the Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church. Who is in that crowd? There are young women and men from youth groups with whom I worked. I told them that they had been loved from all eternity by God and that they all could count always on the church to give them God's love and offer God's acceptance. Since that time, many have told me that they are gay and lesbian. They wondered aloud to me if what I told them about the church was true. There are also women, men, and families who left the Presbyterian Church because they determined that what I said was not true. Not for them. Not for those they love. The church was not a place of love, and it was not a people of acceptance. Nothing I said convinced them otherwise.

Crowding in behind them are those who feel that the church also betrayed them, but they have stayed. They have not necessarily made loud political statements or fought openly for change. They simply lived their faith and served congregations and shared their ministries. Members, elders, ministers, all praying that the church they love might be shown to love them in return. They are looking for justice and some hope that their commitment to Christ and to Christ's church might be recognized and that they would not need to hide from the church the fullness of their lives.

There are others who stayed, and they are standing close to me too. They also believe that the church betrayed them. They say that the Presbyterian Church and I, personally, taught them to love the Bible and believe that the “Bible Speaks to You.”¹ They have read the Scriptures, and they have found the prohibitions about homosexuality. “You say you honor the Scriptures,” they tell me, “but then you refuse to believe what it says. You keep asking questions and struggling with answers and tell us that we are on a long journey. We are tired of that journey. We believe we have arrived. We want the whole church to believe what is before us in God's Word.”

1. Robert McAfee Brown, *The Bible Speaks to You* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955).



Standing near them are others who appear very weary. They are the members who have not taken any stands, but who have remained confused and worried. They have worked and given and led and served, but they feel that the church that they also love is known only for bitter squabbling and constant conflict. They are wanting to know if all this ever will end. They are wondering if a day might come in their lifetimes when they once again will feel pride and joy in being called “Presbyterian.”

It is a crowd around me. I know I am not alone in feeling that way. Many of us feel the constant crowd and the persistent tensions in the church. We want to discover the way that honors and respects each. At the same time, we want to maintain the integrity of the Presbyterian Church and its polity in which we are privileged to work and serve. Grateful for the abundant diversity of the church, we know that none of us is in this church by accident. We are all here because God has called us into this community of faith. Finally, we want to be held together in the unity we have come to know through the church.

All of that is what we want. But we have not been able to find “that way.” The question before us now is: is the report of the task force “that way”?

Like all moderates and, undoubtedly, every single person who has read the report, I have struggled to answer that question. However, the answer I slowly have come to believe is that it is for now and for us the way through this time. For me, it is the way for four reasons.

It is the way because it has listened to the voices that crowd around me and the whole church. Rarely does a church document clearly recognize the varying perspectives and conflicting views in the church with such sensitivity, care, and affirmation as does the task force report. Some may consider this recognition a primary weakness of the report. I consider it a major strength. Some may believe that because its answer is really no “answer” at all that it is unworthy of being considered by the church. Those people, however, who genuinely feel the crowd and hear the contradictory voices are breathing a sigh of relief that no one has been labeled a scapegoat and no single group is identified as “the problem.” Some may feel that the report is inadequate because it does not “take a stand” on either side of the controversy of ordaining gay and lesbian Presbyterians. For one, I am grateful that it does not equate purity with purging some or any from

the church. But, like the genius of our whole system of decision making, it seeks to hold conflicting positions and people together in the church.

It is the way because it is grateful for all the gifts already present in our church. There is an underlying confidence in the report that we do have the means, the people, and the spiritual and ecclesiastical gifts to move through this time and also remain a faithful, vital church. Specifically, the report recognizes that our polity and the whole *Book of Order* are not tedious albatrosses to be avoided or discarded, as many from where I sit view them, but gifts of the generations to be explored with more depth and more awareness. The task force's invitation to consider a difference between "essentials" and "standards" and to see that that difference exists in a primary way in our tradition was not immediately obvious, I must admit. However, with continued reading and study, I believe such a consideration leads us to see that our tradition can bring us to explore what is truly significant, absolutely essential, and critically important in the life of the church and in the faith and ministry of its ordained leaders. For too long the examination of candidates has missed this exploration. Year after year I have sat through examinations that simply applauded whatever "journey of faith" the candidate had taken or concentrated on trivial aspects of the faith and tradition or, worst of all, paraded the theological prowess of the examiner before the body. The report calls sessions and presbyteries again to be genuine explorers among themselves and with candidates for ordained office of the powerful centers of faith and ministry. This position moves the discussion beyond any single issue or question and brings us to discover the theology, the faith, and the life that hold us together. If it does that, the process could assist not only in finding a way through this specific set of issues. It could lead to a profound strengthening of the whole church and all of its leaders.

It is the way because it is mysterious. Without question, I have had to struggle to try to understand the report. In fact, I am still struggling. Some have come to quick conclusions. I am persuaded that its meaning will take much more time, talk, and a willingness, at least, to try what it recommends and suggests. At this point, I do not know exactly what adhering to its positions will do for the church. There is a continuing mystery of it all for me.

However, an experience of mystery is also present in another way. The report, with its encouragement for





continued discernment, opens us to the mysterious presence of the Living God in the church. What a mysterious idea it is that the God of all creation and ages actually cares enough about us that God actually could be speaking to us about the present crisis and future possibilities of the Presbyterian Church! And what an even greater mystery that God is at work right now among, of all people, Presbyterians! But those mysterious and, frankly, mind-bending beliefs are at the heart of the report. It declares that “God works in and through our differences to bring us into the promise of reconciliation, healing, liberation, and redemption.” There are many who believe that the questions with which the Presbyterian Church has been anguishing for more than my entire ministry are peripheral. I respectfully disagree. I believe that the questions about human sexuality in the church are “our questions.” They are the ones we are called to answer. The report brings us to see that, perhaps, up to this time, we have only been scratching the surface. It is not a question of time. It is a question of depth. We have to dig more deeply with one another. Until now, most of our conversations in the church have been with safe ones, with those with whom we agree, with those who will reinforce already held positions. What the task force and its report show the whole church is that the “safe way” is not the way of Christ. It reveals the feeble processes with which we have been engaged and opens us to the possibility that we can go more deeply with one another. This possibility will not be received eagerly by some in the church, especially those who have waited for some kind of justice or those who are supremely wearied by the years of anguish and anger. But there is something great and good also at stake. We need to listen to those with whom we disagree not merely because it is polite or politically correct, but because embedded in their words may just be the Living Word of God. We need to listen very carefully because in their words may be the way God’s gifts in Christ are being offered. To fail to listen may be to fail to find the answer to “our question.” More important, it may be to fail to live up to our calling as God’s own people.

It is the way because it is affirmative. It had all the familiar sights and sounds and feel. The house was quiet. The upstairs room was darkened. The smell of antiseptic was strong. A member of the church was dying. His wife accompanied me to the bedside. We talked softly. We prayed. We touched and held his hands. “It is odd,” his wife said. “He

has been very peaceful and quiet. But once today he opened his eyes and looked into the distance and said only one word." "What was the word?" I asked. "He said, 'Yes.'"

The Presbyterian Church has felt for a long time as if it were in a very dark place. Some even have said we were also in that moment of death. Perhaps they are right. I am praying and working every day as if they are wrong. Whoever is right, I believe we first need to claim the faith of members of my church. We need to claim again the faith to which the report points that "our faith is in the God of Israel who raised Jesus Christ bodily from the dead. . . . It is this one historic faith that will carry the church into the missional future that God is setting before us." Did you hear . . . "before us"? God is holding out a future before us that will make us a great and faithful church that preaches hope and new life in Christ to sinful people and serves in love with a broken world.

We need to say "Yes." We need to say "Yes" . . . there is something before us and beyond us. We need to say "Yes" . . . God is calling us to a life beyond our present experience. We need to say "Yes" . . . we can and we will move beyond today's fear, anger, disappointment, cynicism, and despair. We need to say "Yes" . . . there is a wholeness in Christ that is beyond all division of any kind. We need to believe that God already is at work in that future time that now escapes our full view and complete understanding. We need to claim the hope that God is the One who claims us and will bring something new into being.

The report recommends that we commit to staying together. It seems like a simple request, but to assent to the request commits us not only to finding some way through our present time. It commits us also to trusting with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength that we are moving and being moved to a new time that God is creating for us. It is time to say "Yes" to God.





Another Way Home

Richard A. Ray



If you flick through the pages of our General Assembly reports across the years, you will discover an amazing compendium of earnest endeavors. Presbyterians have talked about almost everything imaginable. And whether or not anyone was listening, we recorded it for posterity. If Baptists are thought to be evangelistic and Methodists to sing, Presbyterians will be remembered as those who talked about every current public issue.

No subject, however, will have proven to be as difficult to address as the one given to the Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church. As complex as that title seems, the pursuit of peace, unity, and purity was not enough. They were also to lead the church, as though any task force or committee could really lead, in the spiritual discernment of its own Christian identity. None of these terms are sufficiently clear, and that became part of their difficulties.

The condition calling for all of this was summarized as our disagreement over four matters: biblical authority and interpretation, Christology, sexuality and ordination standards, and the exercise of power. The nature of these topics is interesting in itself. One can look at them carefully and wonder if, at least to some degree, they were chosen intentionally with the hope of reaching a predictable outcome. Now some would argue that these are hardly the core issues at all.

It was a demanding assignment. All of these people, some representing different constituencies more than the general membership, met together for four years. Not many people would have given up the time. Not many would have thought that this outcome would be worth the commitment. They all had to set aside other things to do it.

Conservatives feared that the task force would give away the farm. Liberals thought that the task force would not consider any real changes. And most of the Presbyterian membership ignored the whole thing. Our PC(USA) members carried out their responsibilities, attempting to live as faithfully as they could in the midst of circumstances that frequently looked like a vale of tears. And if they had their way, many of our members might plan to go on living and



thinking just as they have for years, grateful for their congregations, trusting their pastors, and attempting to understand their duties as well as they could.

And then the ballyhoo began. The church press pumped the importance of the report. Members of the task force crisscrossed the country “interpreting” it. Copies of it became available in presbytery offices and even on the Internet. One might have thought that more Dead Sea Scrolls had been discovered. Someone or some people really wanted this report to be passed.

The liberals found a little window of opportunity in it, and their assurances that the report simply provided peace in our time became more frequent. The conservatives spied that same loophole, declared that the devil was in the details, and organized against it.

Then the big guns were rolled out. Endorsements are more important than signing bonuses these days, even more seductive than objective analysis of the products. Our seminary presidents all came through. Curiously, they did not simply endorse the report for study, as educators might have been expected to do. Then the former and present General Assembly moderators (with one exception) concurred. One wonders how so many creative people, so many friends of mine, were led to think alike.

Equally impressive and perhaps even more representative of the membership at large, the leading Presbyterian renewal organizations said that while some of the report would be good to imbibe, it carried a poison pill that could kill our entire church. This whole thing has suddenly gotten hot.

From my years in the pastorate, I saw the practical problems. From my experience with the church’s boards and agencies, I recalled that special groups sometimes develop their own limited ways of looking at church affairs. And from my years in teaching, I saw the claims of the report in the context of the broader history of the church. I also saw them within the history of the task force.

As I talked with task force members, I could understand how they felt drawn to place the report within a narrative account of their own experiences. They had clearly gone through something that was quite unusual. They claimed, at the conclusion of their meetings, that their experience had helped them to think more clearly about many things. One wonders, however, if they will all still agree with this conviction several years from now. In conjunction with the



uniqueness and intensity of their meetings, it would not hurt for them to have had another year of reflection, with the benefit of some personal distance from their experience. It might have produced a quite different report. The pressure of time normally diminishes the perspective and the best judgment of groups with special assignments.

The final report was inevitably unique because the charge from the General Assembly was more than a little mysterious. What could it mean to lead the church to discern its Christian identity? It was certainly a lofty concept, but it was also remarkably vague, and most of our mature church members had never expressed a need for special assistance in this area. To believe that a General Assembly-appointed task force would know us all that well, after it had secluded itself in meetings for several years, seemed strange.

It was also ambitious to think that, while discussing these grand theological topics, the task force could actually give us some new clue about our theological differences. The truth of the matter is that theological disagreements often cover the more difficult issues and postpone our dealing with them. Group tensions have many causes, serve many purposes, and are notoriously difficult to understand. In some instances, publicly expressed disagreements serve covert purposes and enable large groups to survive.

To get to the bottom of it, however, it was thought that if we trained our sights with the age-old Christian doctrines, we could then enjoy our relationships despite our theological differences, and this task force worked its heart out to prove this theory. Interestingly enough, what it discovered was that the members could agree on most of the old verities and accept some commonly held convictions about them. As individual believers, they could remain pretty much as they were before. The most useful thing about all of this, however, was the reminder that theological differences are not merely about theology. They have far more to do with culture and language, as the Greek and Latin churches discovered to their horror in the early Christian centuries.

Self-identity has never been an easily attained goal. Psychologists are driven to seek help over it, and philosophers can quickly become irrational in even thinking about it. Perhaps one of the reasons that self-identity remains so elusive is that it is basically a very intimate and private matter. A person's intuitions about himself or herself ebb and flow. They grow and develop as we pass, more or less successfully,



through the vicissitudes of our lives. Our awareness of God and the fundamental faith and trust that become locked within our hearts and shape our personalities are at the sea beds of our souls. And then quite tentatively and with understandable caution we sometimes help one another to understand ourselves more profoundly.

Was the direction about discernment of our identity intended to shore up our common doctrines, or was it meant to listen to our dreams and to look within our hearts?

The General Assembly's mandate was not clear. Our task force seemed to lean toward the first alternative, and in its final report it spared no effort in nailing down any theological convictions that might have been blown loose by the winds of time.

How could it, given its resources and its quick decision to spend its first efforts on classic theological issues, have come up with anything different from what it did? It provided beautifully shaped sentences, many beginning with the grand phrase "We are . . ." It could have been as applicable to churches in Ethiopia, Canada, Brazil, and Missouri as to any of us. And equally remote from us as well. Crystal-clear theology, we all know, can be as ontologically cold as Matthew's withered hand (12:9).

The sections on Christian identity and Christology both came to us as though they had been gift-wrapped in Basel or Finkenwald. Listening to the mind of Barth or Bonhoeffer stirs the soul, but it rarely helps us to look at reality through the pains and myths of one another's eyes.

The charge could also have been a good deal more enticing. It could have nudged the task force to accept the risk of what you could call a journey into the subconscious of the Presbyterian Church. That is what good discernment involves. That is also what saintly listening provides and thereby combines spiritual direction with discernment.

We all learn so much this way. We come across the resentments that linger long after separated denominations are merged together. We discover the pain that people feel when cultural differences are treated as if they do not matter at all. And we are surprised by vast resources of intellectual curiosity and creativity. Discernment of the Christian identity of people is not the same as telling them what they ought to think. Presbyterians are better talkers than listeners. When we listen more intently, however, words such as "must" and "should" appear less frequently in a report like this one.



Although the General Assembly's charge could have been clearer, the task force report gives us much to consider. My particular response to it has been organized around ten approaches.

1. In my first approach, I simply measured the amount of space given to the four major topics. I counted the lines in the report: Christology received 30; biblical authority received 44; sexuality and ordination received 102; power and polity received 315.

The amount of space allocated to each area seemed roughly proportionate to that which our culture would have given! Although the focus of the report had been on the importance of our theology, in the end far less space was allocated to it. So I took another approach. I used the outline of John Calvin's *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* as a template. After all, it has stood the test of time.

Calvin's basic outline had four parts. The first two focused on our knowledge of God. The third addressed the way we receive the grace of Christ. The last part included the church and its worship. The outline was roughly identical with the stated aims of the task force and the design of the report. The relative amount of space given to the topics, however, differed enormously. From this model classic text in our Reformed tradition, I saw that we really ought to base everything on our knowledge of God. I also saw that we face the great danger of not doing so.

2. My second approach opens up what looks like an inconsistency in the report. From the perspective of the report as a whole, a deep process of communal sharing and discernment should precede major votes. This approach would enable us to move beyond our tendency for yes/no type decisions. The report then includes the recommendation that the 2006 General Assembly immediately vote up or down on a highly controversial Authoritative Interpretation that presbyteries would never get to ratify.

This conclusion could have been thought through more carefully. The strongest and best arguments in the report itself suggest that we should postpone this vote until we have a longer process of mutual care.



3. In my third approach, I look at the mandate to lead the church in a process of spiritual discernment. Obviously this has not taken place. The members of the task force had a deeply moving experience, but there is no way in which their commitment and their sense of urgency could be widely duplicated in other places. Many of us are not sufficiently prepared to carry it out, and many church members have other priorities. Many simply do not enjoy going to church issue meetings and would never participate.
4. In the fourth approach, I look at the proposed Authoritative Interpretation. It pushes a current practice of the church into a different place. The design is for the whole church to address matters of principle, and the presbyteries and sessions to apply them. An appeal process is supposed to ensure a sense of general balance.

The appeal process, however, provides only for a review of procedural matters. Specific content issues in the ordination exams would be excluded from a second look. That lacks integrity. In the end, is there really much of a review process at all? The suspicion is hard to avoid that this locks in place a local option plan.

The task force has pointed out that this process would require that the ordaining bodies provide more serious exams. Unfortunately, I do not believe that this would really happen very often. Our standards may in fact be slipping away. After all, at line 1104 the report declares that they are merely “aspirational.” This is disappointing. It is ethically vague to say the least. We should keep in mind the general assumption that forgiveness, in common practice, never precedes the deed.

5. My fifth approach concentrates on lines 602–607. In this section, the report says that since people disagree about certain topics, the church should never take a specific stand on them. To put it bluntly, this draws the blood right out of the veins of biblical authority and the church’s responsibility to speak clearly and boldly.
6. The sixth approach deals with the statement at lines 573–574 that the task force took no stand on sexuality. Nevertheless, when the report reduces such matters to church polity procedures, it has in fact said something subtle about sexuality. It has said that the moral contents



are not relevant. It has also implied that sexuality can be ignored as an issue because it is not that complicated. This stance leads, of course, toward thinking of sexuality in terms of alternative normal lifestyles. The footnote at line 596 confirms this.

As subtle as this implication might be, it does convey the impression that such issues as human development, biblical ethics, and psychological stress are irrelevant to the resolution of conflicts and the creation of peace, unity, and purity in the church. I do not think that this will turn out to be that easy for the church.

One of the most painful things at issue here is our awareness that sexual problems, while they are not of ultimate importance, are very complex. It is widely acknowledged that they have deep roots, multiple influences, and social as well as genetic issues. Homosexuality is no exception. There is simply too much that is not yet known either about the causes or the possibilities for therapeutic and spiritual intervention to imply that it is normative.

The church is responsible, as the report confirms, for providing the best pastoral care possible. We do not want to avoid the possibilities of fresh research and more helpful therapeutic care. Thus, there is some point at which we have to encourage more progressive research and become more intellectually hospitable to what truth might bring. The forthcoming task force essay on human sexuality will no doubt help, even though it is not part of the report. Far more important for the church's thought over the next few years, however, will be the contribution made by microtechnology and global communication. As has always been the case (as Galileo discovered), our minds cause us more trouble than our bodies!

7. In the seventh approach, I examine the historical basis for a new Authoritative Interpretation. In the section called "Resources," the report cites a very small series of events and the ensuing interpretation of them, which is declared to be the precedent for greater flexibility.

It is difficult to see how this series of events in the eighteenth century, when there was one confession of faith cited and a smaller population base, could provide a precedent for a larger church with a radically different sense of confessional authority. It is also implausible that



the concept of allowing doctrinal “scruples” could be expanded into polity and morality.

There are certainly instances in the broader history of the church that could serve as precedents in an entirely different direction. For example, in the preceding century, Jesuit theologians attempted to work out a flexible approach to sin and its remedies. It became known as “probabalism.” More responsible moral examinations were employed to accommodate what was essential. While the process did not use the term “scruples,” it was reasonably close.

Other Christian thinkers quickly brought criticism to bear on this practice. Blaise Pascal in Letter V of *The Provincial Letters* regarded it as “the basis of all licentiousness.” As recently as the beginning of the twentieth century, the distinguished historian Adolph von Harnack called it the “deadly enemy of all religious and moral convictions” (*History of Dogma*, vol. 7). While the Presbyterian and the Jesuit issues were not the same nor handled within the same structures of church polity, there is enough similarity in the perspective to indicate that historical incidents cannot be assumed to be precedents or resources very easily.

8. In my eighth approach, I realize that we have reached the point where we base so many of our hopes on some kind of change in our polity system. With the church being primarily a spiritual community, one created and called into faithfulness through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, our greatest resource is the work of the Holy Spirit and the gospel. Nevertheless, we often attempt to change things through policy when our greater resource is prayer. In 1 Corinthians, Paul says that the source of change is not words of wisdom but a demonstration of the Spirit and power. How are we Presbyterians to access that?
9. In the ninth approach, we look at a cultural preconception. As we are all aware, the idea of “system” has become popular. It ranges all the way from consumer products to marriage therapy. Everything is understood from this perspective. So it should be no real surprise that our task force proposes a change in our system.

I believe, however, that we ought to go first to a far deeper place. John Calvin and Thomas Aquinas would



agree. As both said, we begin by returning to the sure knowledge of God. In his *Summa Contra Gentiles* (book 3, chaps. 1–3 and 25–37), Aquinas argues that all human well-being occurs when we are directed to the knowledge of God, which is our ultimate purpose. The key to his thinking is not process or procedure. It is purpose.

The concept of living according to our ultimate purpose is much closer to the perspective of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. This approach has very little to do with the idea that we can create peace, unity, and purity through organizational changes.

In fact, if you consider the great, powerful theological consensus of the Christian church that separated it from the Roman Empire and all of the subsequent sacra-political revivals, it is the belief that God transcends all systems. From Augustine through Jonathan Edwards and beyond, all of our theologians have told us that our destiny lies within our ultimate purpose of knowing God and enjoying him forever.

10. The final approach concerns our own spiritual condition. We are not yet prepared to understand the issues in the fifth recommendation. If we had a revised report, we would want it to guide us back to God. We would ask it to lead us to the God who has, before the stars shone or the tides twisted in their depths, discerned exactly who we are and weighed us in his balances. He saw, before we became trapped into thinking that if we knew ourselves we could survive, that only the cross and the empty tomb could restore our lives. What we deeply need is not a new sense of our identity but a new sense of our own spiritual purpose. Even tampering with our relationship with angels, as Aquinas put it, would not work that way. And so neither would direct attention to changes in our *Book of Order* bear much fruit. All of that is secondary. Aquinas says that happiness in our relations with one another is always “concomitant.” It comes from having turned and first learned to know and to love God. We need a season of repentance and direction before we vote. In two years’ time, our entire perspective could be changed. And thus in two years it might also please God more.

I close with a reminder from the life of Richard Sibbes. He was a conscientious Calvinist who attempted to serve



faithfully in the seventeenth-century English church. The church was deeply polarized. Some of his colleagues such as William Ames felt that they had to leave. Sibbes stayed. He saw that reconciliation would not come through straightening out the church regulations. The way forward first called for godly preaching, as the Puritan movement called it, prayer, and holy living. This was the way that would lead to peace. Increasingly stripped of his privileges and appointments, he stayed the course.

Sibbes is important for us because his method provides a model. Spiritual discernment, he would have said, is concomitant. It is a special gift. It is a by-product that comes from God's participation in our study of Scripture and in our intellectual courage. It is a model that dated from the third century when Origen combined a creative interpretation of Scripture with a life dedicated to the pursuit of holiness and prayer. And as Sibbes reinvoked it in his time, so can we in ours. He walked humbly with the Lord and knew, as did both Aquinas and Calvin before him, that knowing and trusting the Lord would guide his thought (cf. Mark E. Dever, *Richard Sibbes: Puritanism and Calvinism in Late Elizabethan and Early Stuart England* [Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2000]).

Those who met so many times and who prepared the report were very diligent in their efforts. They took an important step for the church and have enabled others to pick up the task and to go further. Our current struggles have taught us to address our spiritual issues before seeking to pass new administrative measures. Direction will come as a gift when we have become better prepared to receive it.

One possibility would be for us to call upon our seminary presidents and moderators again. Let those who initially saw so much that was helpful in the report have an opportunity to study it further and to make recommendations to us about it in 2008. And let us support their work through our own commitments to grow in grace. We can go further toward our destiny as the body of Christ, but in order to get there we will have to find another way home.



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