

Theology Matters

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In addition to our regular mailing list, this issue of *Theology Matters* is being mailed, with the help of the Presbyterian Coalition, to every pastor/clerk of session in the denomination.

The Report of the Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity will NOT bring Peace, Unity or Purity to our Denomination

Presbyterian Renewal Groups, along with many pastors and their sessions, are on record opposing the Report of the Task Force on the Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church (PUP). You will find their Statement on p. 2. Ecumenical groups note that the PC(USA) Task Force is but one of several similar attempts across denominations to give the appearance of maintaining ordination standards while undermining them with a new twist on “local option.” Read about this new strategy in the Association for Church Renewal Statement on p. 3.

This issue of *Theology Matters* focuses on the problems in the PUP Report. Articles in this issue point out some of the theological and historical distortions and inaccuracies. However, the most serious problem in the Report is in its Recommendations section. Recommendation 5 proposes a new authoritative interpretation (AI) of Book of Order paragraph G-6.0108. The proposed AI contradicts Scripture and our Confessions, overturns 2000 years of church history, and holds in contempt the church-wide votes by presbyteries.

As Jim Berkley writes on p. 7, “What the A.I. would do is allow ordaining bodies to determine if outright departure from scriptural and/or constitutional standards ‘constitutes a failure to adhere to the essentials of Reformed faith and polity.’ Should a session or presbytery consider such a departure inessential, it could freely ordain the person, despite any continuing unrepentant failure of fidelity or chastity—or any other troubling sin or cock-eyed theology, for that matter.” This new authoritative interpretation WILL NOT be voted on by the presbyteries. It can be adopted by a simple majority vote of commissioners to the 217th General Assembly in June 2006.

At the October 16 called meeting of the Presbytery of Shenandoah, Rev. Dr. John Sloop asked Task Force member, Dr. Frances Taylor Gench:

“Is it your understanding that the Book of Order currently prohibits the ordination of self-affirming, practicing, unrepentant, homosexual persons?” Task Force member Gench answered, “Yes.”

Sloop asked, “Am I correct that should the PUP Report pass, it will be possible to ordain self-affirming, practicing, unrepentant homosexual persons?” Gench answered, “Yes.”

Tricia Dykers Koenig, the national organizer for the homosexual advocacy group, the Covenant Network, said at their national gathering that if the Report passes,

“...it would still be a huge step forward because a lot more ordinations would be happening.”

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Statement of Presbyterian Renewal Ministries On The Peace, Unity, And Purity Report

The General Assembly Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church has issued a report to the denomination, requesting that Presbyterians reflect upon its findings in a period of discernment. We, representatives of renewal organizations in the Presbyterian Church (USA), accept the Task Force invitation and have gathered in Chicago for the purpose of studying and responding to the Task Force Report.

Task Force members worked long and hard and are to be thanked for their efforts to create an instrument whose purpose is to help the church discern how to live in peace, unity, and purity. With them, we are grieved by our denomination's decline and disunity. We had hoped and prayed that from the Task Force Report we would hear a witness to the Word of the Lord that would speak to the needs of our church.

In parts of this Report, we do hear a witness to the Word of God. Certain statements affirm God's eternal triune identity, the singular saving lordship of Jesus Christ, the authority of Holy Scripture, and the necessity of living a disciplined and holy life.

In spite of these valuable affirmations, we conclude with regret that the Report has not given the church a consistently clear witness to the Word of God. Taken as a whole, it constitutes a blend of truth and error that, if adopted, will undermine the church's purity and exacerbate the denomination's disunity. Indeed, it will promote schism by permitting the disregard of clear standards of Scripture and the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

This Report will not promote the peace and unity of the church

The Report promotes radical change while claiming to make no change. Recommendation 5 will bring about denominational fragmentation through de facto local option. Ordaining bodies would be authorized to disregard explicit constitutional standards, including but not limited to the fidelity/chastity requirement in G-6.0106b.

The proposed authoritative interpretation would reverse the will of the church without consulting the church through constitutional amendment. Thus, it does not respect the Presbyterian way of delineating and maintaining boundaries for our community. Although higher governing bodies would be permitted to review the work of ordaining bodies, they would not be under any obligation to ensure compliance with confessional standards specifically singled out by amendment and constitutionally required of all governing bodies. Indeed, they would be encouraged to "honor" that work with a

"presumption of wisdom." The proposed authoritative interpretation, which was intended to advance church unity, will further divide the church by inviting all ordaining bodies to do "what is right in their own eyes" (Ju 21:25). They will have the right to convert a mandated "shall" in The Book of Order to a merely permissible "may" or "might," even though The Book of Order carefully distinguishes between these ways of speaking.

In addition, the Task Force Report will not promote unity in the worldwide church. Our brothers and sisters in the non-Western church – the majority church – find our moral confusion troubling. Our relationship with them has been harmed and would be further harmed by the adoption of this Report.

The Report will not promote the purity of the church

For the past quarter century, the Presbyterian Church (USA) has repeatedly expressed its conviction regarding God's will in matters of sexual morality. The Report subverts these core sexual standards of behavior that are grounded in Scripture by substituting sincerely expressed personal opinions for rigorous biblical exegesis that has been confirmed by centuries of church tradition.

The Report accepts conflicting interpretations of Scripture without doing the hard work of helping the church to assess the respective merits of these interpretations. The Report proposes compromising the one Word of God with "words," by replacing the witness of Scripture with the product of dialogue. By replacing the authority of Scripture with a consensus-building process, the Report separates the church from its only real source of purity, Jesus Christ. The Lord of the church prays for our purity, "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17).

These observations lead us to conclude that the Task Force Report does not provide what the church needs at this critical juncture in our life together. The Report will not promote the peace, unity, and purity for which the Savior prays, for which we hope, and to which we are committed.

Because we cannot commend the whole Report to the church, our renewal organizations will offer resources to assist the church in discerning a better way to seek its peace, unity, and purity.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all.

Signed by

Rev. Dr. Jerry Andrews, Co-Moderator, Presbyterian Coalition
Ms. Gabrielle S. Avedian, Presbyterian Forum
Rev. Anita Bell, Co-Moderator, Presbyterian Coalition
Rev. Dr. Jim Berkley, Interim Director, Presbyterian Action for

Faith and Freedom

Elder Marie Bowen, Executive Director, Presbyterians Pro Life
Rev. Katie Brandt, Executive Director, Presbyterian Forum
Dr. Richard Burnett, Erskine Seminary
Rev. Sue Cyre, Executive Director, Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry
Rev. Dr. Gerrit Dawson, Pastor, First Presbyterian Church, Baton Rouge, Louisiana
Rev. Tom Edwards, Executive Director, New Wineskins Initiative
Rev. Don Elliot, President, Presbyterians Pro Life
Rev. Dennis Finnegan, Vice President, Presbyterian Reformed Ministries International
Dr. Robert Gagnon, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary
Elder Peggy Hedden, Chair, Presbyterian Lay Committee
Elder Bob Howard, Presbyterian Lay Committee
Rev. Dr. Brad Long, Executive Director, Presbyterian Reformed Ministries International
Rev. Dr. Peyton Johnson, Pastor, Lakeside Presbyterian Church, Tarpon Springs, Florida
Rev. Dr. Mark Patterson, Pastor, Community Presbyterian Church, Ventura, California
Elder Terry Schlossberg, Executive Director, The Presbyterian Coalition
Rev. Cindy Strickler, Presbyterian-Reformed Ministries

International

Rev. James Tony, Presbyterian Coalition
Rev. Michael Walker, Executive Director, Presbyterians for Renewal
Rev. Parker Williamson, Executive Director, Presbyterian Lay Committee
Elder Alan Wisdom, Interim President, Institute on Religion and Democracy

Organizations

The Institute on Religion and Democracy
The New Wineskins Initiative
Presbyterian Action for Faith and Freedom
The Presbyterian Coalition
The Presbyterian Forum
The Presbyterian Lay Committee
Presbyterian-Reformed Ministries International
Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry
Presbyterians for Renewal
Presbyterians Pro Life
Voices of Orthodox Women

Sessions who endorse the statement

Visit www.presbycoalition.org to see the growing list of signatories and to add your own name.

The following statement reveals a new move in several denominations to pretend to maintain ordination standards while permitting ordaining bodies to set aside the standards in order to ordain those in homosexual relationships.

Association for Church Renewal Statement (Ecumenical)

And you, who once were estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he [Christ] has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him, provided that you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which has been preached to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister. (Colossians 1:21-23, RSV)

Sisters and Brothers in the Lord:

We, renewal leaders in various North American Protestant denominations, write you with thanksgiving for Christ's great work of reconciliation and sanctification. It is our only hope in life and death.

We encourage you to remain steadfast in your faith in Christ's work, looking to him as the sole source of unity and purity within his church. There are constantly shifting alternatives that offer a false, cheap peace. But we urge you not to let go of the true and costly peace won by Jesus Christ.

As many of us gathered October 17-18 in Arlington, Virginia, we noted a shifting situation in several denominations. This letter is our attempt to alert you to these new developments.

The debate within our churches over biblical standards for human sexuality may be entering a new phase. For decades, revisionists have argued that the Scriptures, properly understood, do not prohibit homosexuality as it is practiced today. Indeed, they have insisted that biblical values of "justice" require the acceptance of homosexual relationships.

Increasingly, however, the arguments have shifted. We now see, in several denominations, a new strategy to win the church's affirmation of homosexual acts. This new strategy is less direct. It is offered as a "compromise," a "third way." Yet the effect would be the same: to undermine and ultimately to set aside the historic Christian teaching that affirms God's good gift of sexual intimacy solely within the marriage of man and woman.

We stand opposed to this false "third way," with the same firmness with which we opposed the earlier attempts to re-interpret the Bible. We warn you to beware such "compromises" that give away too much.

The essence of the new strategy is this: to leave in church law books the orthodox standards calling Christians to fidelity in marriage and sexual abstinence in singleness, while inventing procedural devices permitting church bodies and officials to disregard the standards at will. This strategy has been proposed—and, in some cases,

functionally adopted—in the Episcopal Church, the American Baptist Churches, the United Methodist Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Insofar as it succeeds in some of those denominations, the strategy will likely be replicated elsewhere.

This strategy marks, in some ways, a retreat by the pro-homosexuality advocates. Tacitly, they are conceding that the weight of biblical and traditional Christian teaching is against them. They have not been able adequately to answer the powerful exegesis buttressing that teaching, represented especially by Robert Gagnon's masterwork *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*. The pro-homosexuality advocates have not persuaded most church members to abandon the historic teaching. For this indirect vindication of the truth, we must all be grateful to God.

Yet we cannot be content with standards that remain on paper while being emptied of all force. This false "compromise" would be, in some respects, more damaging than a straightforward blessing of homosexual relations. Not only would it convey tolerance of sin in the important area of sexuality, but it would also set the church adrift more generally.

This "third way" would sever the church's practice from its doctrine. It would set a terrible precedent of a church openly acknowledging a biblical command and then treating obedience to that command as optional. If denominations start granting exemptions from church discipline in one area, it will be very difficult to maintain any kind of covenant of mutual accountability within the church. No promise of ecclesiastical peace and unity can justify these distortions of the church's theology and polity.

Advocates for this "third way" make arguments that strain credibility to the breaking point. They claim that they are "proposing no changes" to the church's standards. But in fact they are seeking a radical change—to demote the standards to "non-essential" status. They claim that their "compromise" would split the difference between traditionalist and revisionist views on sexuality. But in fact it would yield exactly the result desired by the revisionists—moral approbation of non-marital sex—on a slightly longer timeline.

"Third way" proponents also claim that their solution would strike a balance between different interpretations of the Scriptures. When two interpretations are mutually contradictory, these proponents want to accept both the one and the other as equally valid. They urge the church to "get beyond yes/no polarities" that force it to make painful choices. Their "third way" would avoid such choices by affirming all individuals interpreting the Bible as sincere and faithful Christians.

This approach is utter nonsense. The Bible is filled with unavoidable yes/no choices: "I set before you life and death, blessing and curse" (Deuteronomy 30:19); "Choose

this day whom you will serve" (Joshua 24:15); "He will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left" (Matthew 25:33); "Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you" (Revelation 3:20).

A church that systematically refuses to choose between truth and error has no place left to stand. To the extent that any church declines to distinguish the better from the worse biblical interpretations, it undercuts its own ability to teach clear doctrine from the Scriptures.

The existence of different interpretations does not imply that all those interpretations are equally valid. Nor does it imply that all interpreters are equally faithful. On the contrary, it is more likely that every interpreter falls short of complete faithfulness—to a greater or lesser degree. The church cannot give unconditional affirmation to all its members' personal views of Scripture. It always has the responsibility to seek the most faithful interpretation and to act upon it.

We are convinced—by the consistent testimony of the Scriptures and the Church Universal, through the ages and around the world—that the fidelity in marriage/abstinence in singleness standard remains the most faithful interpretation of God's will for human sexuality. This is an essential component of our calling in the Lord Jesus and our sanctification through the Holy Spirit, who purposes to "present [us] holy and blameless and irreproachable before him." We ask you to stand steadfast with us in rejecting any compromise that would shift Christ's church away from that godly endeavor.

Signed by:

Sara L. Anderson, Executive Vice President, Bristol House, Ltd. (United Methodist)
The Rev. James D. Berkley, Interim Director, Presbyterian Action for Faith & Freedom
The Rev. Karen Booth, Executive Director, Transforming Congregations (United Methodist)
Verna M. and Dr. Robert H. Blackburn, National Alliance of Covenanting Congregations (United Church of Canada)
Pastor Mark C. Chavez, Director, WordAlone Network (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America)
The Rev. Susan Cyre, Executive Director, Presbyterians for Faith, Family, and Ministry
The Rt. Rev. Robert Duncan, Episcopal Bishop of Pittsburgh, Moderator of the Anglican Communion Network
The Rev. Thomas J. Edwards, Executive Director, New Wineskins Initiative (Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.))
The Rev. Ira Gallaway, Confessing Movement (United Methodist)
Dr. Scott M. Gibson, President, American Baptist Evangelicals
The Rev. Dr. Donna Hailson, pastor, author, former professor (American Baptist)
The Rev. James V. Heidinger, President, Good News (United Methodist)
Arthur Hiley, Vice President, National Alliance of Covenanting Congregations (United Church of Canada)
The Rev. Harold S. Martin, Editor, Brethren Revival Fellowship (Church of the Brethren)
Craig Alan Myers, Chairman, Brethren Revival Fellowship (Church of the Brethren)

The Rev. Bill Nicoson, Executive Director, American Baptist Evangelicals
Dr. Thomas C. Oden, board member, Confessing Movement (United Methodist)
David Runnion-Bareford, Executive Director, Biblical Witness Fellowship (United Church of Christ)
Terry Schlossberg, Executive Director, Presbyterian Coalition
Faye Short, President, RENEW Network (United Methodist)
David and Jean Leu Stanley, Chairman and Steering Committee member, UMAction (United Methodist)

The Rev. Vernon Stoop, Executive Director, Focus Renewal Ministries in the United Church of Christ
The Rev. Michael Walker, Executive Director, Presbyterians for Renewal
Roland J. Wells, Vice President, Great Commission Network (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America)
The Rev. Todd H. Wetzel, Executive Director, Anglicans United
The Rev. Parker T. Williamson, Editor and Chief Executive Officer, Presbyterian Lay Committee
Alan Wisdom, Interim President, Institute on Religion and Democracy, elder in Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Peace, Unity, and Purity Report: Neither Faithful nor Effective

by James D. Berkley

This presentation was made at the Presbyterian Gathering in Philadelphia, Oct. 2005, and repeated in briefer form at the Presbyterian Coalition Gathering IX in Orlando, November, 2005.

I love Italian sausage pizza. But have you ever seen what goes into sausage? If you have, I don't want to know. As I said, I like sausage pizza, and I want to keep on liking it. I've learned in life that there are some things it's just best not to know, and sausage ingredients is one of those things.

In a way, Presbyterian issues are a lot like sausage. Sometimes it's a little startling to know exactly what went into some actions. I had the privilege of following the Theological Task Force through much of its journey. I watched most of its open sessions—all of them for the last couple of years. I heard the Task Force members study the Scriptures and church history, read many of the papers they read, and listened intently as they ventured a few opinions in public. I grew to like the people a lot, and I am very appreciative of the sacrifices they made to be part of the Task Force. I even watched some of the ingredients slip into the sausage they made.

Thus, the taste of their final sausage is a major surprise and disappointment. I thought it would go down better than it has. I expected it to be bland and somewhat forgettable. It is neither. Thus, I write not to praise their sausage, but to bury it.

In this task of analysis, I owe much gratitude to Rob Gagnon; Henry Green and Michael Walker of PFR; Parker Williamson, Peggy Hedden, and Bob Howard of the Lay Committee; Mark Patterson; Gerrit Dawson; the renewal leaders who gathered in Chicago; and many others who have commented on the Report. I draw liberally from all of them, so there is not much original here. But I trust at least my gathering it together in one place will be of benefit, as you assess the Report for yourselves.

So, what is the Task Force, and what was it asked to do?

Twenty members, chosen for their diversity and gifts, comprised the group. The balance, once it was sorted out, was definitely liberal, but it wasn't a horribly skewed sample. The members were, as a whole, very gifted and able. They've met about three times a year, several days at a time, since 2001.

They were given a charter to "lead the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in spiritual discernment of our Christian identity, in and for the 21st century...." It was odd wording about "spiritual discernment of our Christian identity," but it basically meant to figure out what makes us Christian in this time and place. They were to use "a process which includes conferring with synods, presbyteries, and congregations seeking the peace, unity, and purity of the church." Again, it's very inelegant wording, but I think they were supposed to talk with interested parties about peace, unity, and purity. They were also given specific fields of inquiry: "This discernment shall include but not be limited to issues of Christology, biblical authority and interpretation, ordination standards, and power." The Task Force covered most of that ground except for *power*, which kind of got short shrift.

In addition, the Task Force was asked to deliver a *product*: "to develop a process and an instrument by which congregations and governing bodies throughout our church may reflect on and discuss the matters that unite and divide us, praying that the Holy Spirit will promote the peace, unity, and purity of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)." Again, simplified, this means that they were to produce a process and an instrument for reflection and discussion. Note what it is: a *process* and an *instrument* for governing bodies to use to reflect on and discuss peace, unity, and purity. A process and an instrument. For reflection and discussion.

Okay, what's missing in that mandate? Nowhere does General Assembly give the Task Force the job of distorting our polity! They weren't asked to propose a major change that would in effect render useless every decision made by those responsible for changing our polity or Constitution. In a classic example of mission creep, the Theological Task Force has produced an indigestible sausage, when General Assembly asked them only for a schematic!

One might have guessed that there would be trouble, when the prologue to the original mandate described how we Presbyterians "share a heritage of listening *for* the way in which Scripture speaks as we struggle with hard issues." Didn't Presbyterians get in trouble just about the same time we started listening *for* Scripture to possibly speak something we might endorse, rather than listening *to* what Scripture clearly *does* speak to us, like it or not?

The Task Force members met, ironed out uncomfortable beginnings, genuinely interacted with one another, taught one another, expended prodigious amounts of time and effort, and only reluctantly moved from information gathering toward resolution and a report. For me, sitting in was like taking a politicized class in church history, polity, and watered-down hermeneutics.

Why the closed doors?

But sitting in was not always possible. The same Task Force that genuinely sought to include observers and the press in worship, Communion, and group hugs started meeting increasingly in closed sessions, often for major parts of days. It became obvious that *every* significant decision would be made in private, that we observers would *never* get to witness any true wrestling with differences or searching for common ground.

While people I respect solemnly swear to this day that no decisions were made in the closed sessions, I remain entirely unconvinced. I saw the group go into closed sessions without a plan and come out with agreement and a plan. Obviously, enormous decisions were hammered out behind the closed doors—such things as what direction the papers would take, who would write them, how the papers would be vetted, what they thought of early drafts, and so on.

When the doors did swing open for public sessions, the Task Force used the time to mop up. There would be some minor copy editing of text already hammered out. Decisions made in private would be formalized in a perfunctory public vote. But not a hint was given about what went into the sausage making.

In my opinion, this blatant, repeated dependence on closed meetings violated the proper intent of our denominational open meeting policy, even though the Task Force had been given license to close its doors "... solely for the purpose of exchanging views on sensitive theological issues." When permission was originally sought, the idea was to use it sparingly to "play with ideas" not yet fully formed.

But the Task Force used closed sessions addictively, in ever-increasing doses. This caused two major problems. First, the Task Force members lost a grand opportunity to *show* the church how to reach consensus through differences. They tell us that they did, and it's evident that they did. But *how* did they do it? What worked, and what didn't? We'll never know.

Second, the Task Force left everyone speculating on what deals were made to get a conclusion, on what was given up by any side in order to reach final consensus. Where nothing is revealed, we on the outside tend to manufacture conjectures. How much better to have been able to witness the process! But that was not to be.

In August, the Task Force finished and released its Report. Members have now fanned out to presbyteries and other gatherings, selling it like mad. In January 2006, they'll gather one final time to finish any possible tweaking before the Report is submitted to General Assembly next June. What we have now is not final-final, but nearly so. I would be terribly surprised if the Task Force baited us for five months with a dummy report and then switched to another concept altogether. But I was surprised with the Report that we got in August, so I wouldn't bet the mortgage on it.

Okay, so what does the Task Force Report say? There are five sections:

- An initial section on theology,
- A report of the group's progress and work,
- A discussion of the issues that it was given to chew on,
- A resource section that is short on actual resources but has some interesting commentary on the tension between four "complementary commitments," and
- Seven recommendations for General Assembly to approve, some with several subsections, and each with an accompanying rationale.

I am pleased to say that there are a number of aspects of the Report to commend—and here I am especially indebted to Henry Green and the PFR issues ministry. What's there to like?

- First, most of it is reasonably faithful to the Scriptures and the long-established convictions of the PC(USA). (You'll notice some qualifiers, such as "*most* of it is *reasonably* faithful." That's because interspersed with great theology are some vague clinkers that are nearly impossible to evaluate, because they could mean so many things to different people with different expectations.)
- There is a clear affirmation of God's eternal triune identity as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—not Hughie, Louie, and Dewey, or Curly, Larry, and Moe, or any other threesome that I await someone springing on us next, after some cornball innovations I've heard for the Trinity.

- The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are described as the true Word of God and our rule of faith and life. (Ah, if only the entire Report consistently lived out that sound theology!)
- We find a robust Christology that understands Jesus Christ as being fully human and fully divine.
- The confession that our hope resides in the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is refreshing, especially with some circles scoffing at substitutionary atonement these days.
- There is recognition that Christ alone is Lord and Savior and that the entire world stands in need of his grace. Again, considering the syncretism and universalism I see in some places—such as the Women’s Ministry Unit website—this is good stuff!

Now, even as we sing these praises, we may stop a little short and have to ask ourselves: What kind of church are we in, where the fact that a report calls Jesus Lord and Savior is notable enough to be commended? Wouldn’t that be a little like your commending me for this paper because I didn’t drool all over it this time? Shouldn’t such things as the Lordship of Jesus Christ be a safe “given” in our church? Well, at least it was safely so in the Task Force Report. This much was *good* about the Report.

But, as you are well aware, there are a number of problems in the Report, as well—significant problems that have provoked many a furrowed brow and are causing a thumbs down on the Report’s acceptance.

Major problem #1:

The biggest and fatal problem is Recommendation #5, a new authoritative interpretation (A.I.) for G-6.0108. Note that it’s not the usual suspect—G-6.0106b. This A.I. seeks to give a different spin to a section two paragraphs later in the Book of Order: G-6.0108. What the A.I. would do is allow ordaining bodies to determine if outright departure from scriptural and/or constitutional standards “constitutes a failure to adhere to the essentials of Reformed faith and polity.” Should a session or presbytery consider such a departure inessential, it could freely ordain the person, despite any continuing unrepentant failure of fidelity or chastity—or any other troubling sin or cock-eyed theology, for that matter.

Let me briefly note seven glaring problems with this proposed authoritative interpretation:

Reason a: It would permit behavior that would have scandalized Jesus. Jesus never loosened sexual mores; he tightened them up. Think of the adultery bar being raised to preclude lust as well, or the murder bar raised to disallow anger. Jesus made it a habit to violate ridiculous, outdated laws of human invention, but didn’t do so with anything about sexual morality. Jesus’ failure to say anything permissive about homosexual behavior, combined with his words against all sexual immorality,

assures us that he justly would have been appalled by homosexual behavior.

Reason b: This A.I. would create an upside-down situation, where the smaller part shall govern the larger part. This situation would be the exact opposite of G-1.0400, one of the historic principles of church government, which says that the larger part shall govern the smaller part. Why should an individual governing body be given sanction to disregard what the church as a whole has made plain, unequivocal, and mandatory? How unPresbyterian from the get-go!

Reason c: Atypical ordinations now performed dishonestly, defiantly, and illegitimately would become common, sanctioned, and routine. The door would be cracked open so far that any behavior could get through.

Reason d: A standard is no standard if it is not standard. One simply cannot have “nonessential requirements.” By saying we have standards but they aren’t essential, we would make a mockery of language as well as Christian morality!

Reason e: The Report, and thus the A.I., confuses standards and ideals, saying generally, “Sure we have standards, but, hey, no one is perfect. No one can keep our standards. So we just won’t worry about this pesky little inessential standard about fidelity and chastity.” Wrong! It confuses standards and ideals. Standards are what *must* be kept, but *ideals* are what we can only aspire to keep perfectly.

Reason f: It is striking that in substance, what the Task Force is proposing in the A.I. is Amendment A from 2001 in recycled form. In our last national vote on fidelity and chastity, those wanting to discard our standard proposed adding this wording to the previous paragraph, G-6.0106a: “suitability to hold office is determined by the governing body where the examination for ordination or installation takes place, guided by scriptural and constitutional standards, under the authority and Lordship of Jesus Christ.” So how is the Task Force’s proposed A.I. functionally any different than this previous proposal, which was defeated by a nearly 3:1 margin by presbyteries? How dull we would have to be to reject it decisively in 2001, yet get duped into accepting it now in another form!

Reason g: An Authoritative Interpretation ought to better explain a section of the Constitution. The proposed A.I. of G-6.0108, however, would actually violate the meaning and purpose of that section, which is intended to *limit* the bounds of individual conscience. How could we force into that context a radical restatement that would instead give unprecedented *latitude* to the ordaining body?

Major problem #2:

Task Force recommendation #4 would urge governing bodies to use consensus decision-making alongside parliamentary procedure. Why not? Isn’t consensus the

latest rage? There are a number of reasons not to favor it, including these:

Reason a: Consensus decision-making is clearly unconstitutional. Perhaps if we start ignoring one section of the Constitution, we could go on to ignore others. But our Book of Order states most clearly in G-9.0302 that “**All** meetings of governing bodies **shall** be conducted in accordance with the most recent edition of *Robert’s Rules of Order*....” If we were to decide to change our practices, we would need to amend our Constitution, not just follow the unconstitutional advice of the Task Force.

Reason b: If there is a reticent, malleable minority, consensus decision-making can be experienced as highly coercive. To speak against a proposal, one has to break the consensus of the group, and so people just remain silent but unhappy. Parliamentarian supreme Marianne Wolfe speaks disparagingly about consensus decision-making in *Parliamentary Procedures in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, calling it “antithetical to...the basic rights of the individual,” “manipulative and overpowering to the rights of the minority,” and “far more destructive to unity than open disagreement and the freedom of the right to disagree.” Why would we ever decide to switch to something more destructive to unity?

Reason c: Conversely, consensus decision-making gives a vocal, determined minority faction the ability to place the majority over a barrel until the single-minded minority viewpoint gets its way. Just one individual can impair the whole body or unduly distort its decisions.

Reason d: Frankly, at this point in our debates over sexuality, the resort to consensus seems highly suspect. When a weak minority viewpoint cannot win a direct vote and has been getting walloped with greater and greater margins of defeat, *now* it starts to warm up to consensus? Hmmm. I wonder why? It would seem that perhaps the minority aims to obtain through consensus what it could never achieve through majority rule.

Major problem #3:

The Report’s language leaves overabundant “wobble room.” The Report is ambiguous throughout, leading readily to multiple interpretations. Such ambiguity appears to be intentional, in order to allow everyone to find in it whatever they want to find. For example, the Report lists a point of agreement: “Those who aspire to ordination must lead faithful lives. Those who demonstrate licentious behavior should not be ordained.” But what does “faithful” mean? What would “licentious behavior” be? It is left unclear, and that is what you get when disparate voices are forced to reach a fuzzy consensus.

Major problem #4:

Both the reasoning of the Task Force and the process that it followed neglected critical thinking. Task Force members deftly demonstrated what I have termed “the problem of pooled opinions.” In many ways and at many times, they have taken many options and, without adequate evaluation, pooled them as if each one were of equal

weight. Then, given that particular pool of options, they have claimed that they don’t have enough clarity or consensus to make a decision. But, ironically, the alleged lack of clarity was entirely of their own choosing, and the lack of consensus resulted entirely from their own abandonment of critical thinking. For instance:

- They looked at various methods of biblical interpretation, settling on none. It’s as if they were saying, “We don’t know what Scripture really says about homosexuality, but there is a wide variety of equally valid opinions.”
- They read excerpts of the work of various theological writers, but, when they discussed the few articles, they seemed to give as much (or actually more) credence to marginal works as they did to the most meticulous and authoritative treatise on the subject.
- They considered the viewpoints of everyone on the Task Force, but didn’t attempt to evaluate the coherence of the thinking, or to come to a decision that involved right or wrong, wisdom or folly.

Major problem #5:

The Task Force seemed unable to understand that sincerity of belief does not make a belief right or honorable. It was so busy honoring anything lifted up, that it was as indiscriminating as drunken sailors saluting dish towels on a clothesline, thinking they’re saluting flags.

What would result if the recommendations were approved?

The list is quick and simple:

Result #1: Practicing homosexual persons would be ordained to office in every session and presbytery that has a majority so inclined. There would be nothing to hold back the pent-up demand, and we would soon have a flood of elders, deacons, and pastors ordained contrary to the standards that Christians have always upheld.

Result #2: Administrative review by higher governing bodies and judicial review by Permanent Judicial Commissions would be hindered, if not rendered impotent. The very language of the A.I. could give license to doubt that PJs could even consider the *substance* of cases of this sort, rather than only the *conduct* of the proceedings. With a “presumption of wisdom” accorded to ordaining bodies, who could contend that the bodies erred?

Result #3: We would see the balkanization of the PC(USA), the end of connectionalism. Each ordaining body could do what is right in its own eyes, leading to a patchwork of practices, no uniformity of opportunity for candidates, unequal expectations, and nightmare transfers. What’s more, there is nothing limiting such balkanized practices only to ordination matters. What would preclude vastly differing practices on church property matters, women’s roles, or even racial equality?

Result #4: There would be myriad battles everywhere, all the time. Every session and presbytery would fight over ordinations and calls. When the rules only sometimes apply, we would endlessly fight over which times to apply them.

Result #5: Former authoritative interpretations, such as the Londonderry ruling by the GAPJC, would be completely contradicted—indeed, set aside. Clear precedent would be wiped out in one fell swoop.

Result #6: Approval of the Task Force Report would not bring resolution, because it attempts a polity compromise for a distinctly theological crisis. Rather than resolve the problems, it would fan the flames for schism.

Result #7: Approval would severely damage our already fragile relationship with stalwart, orthodox Presbyterian churches in other countries. News of our decision, and especially a spike in unconstitutional ordinations, would compromise fellow Presbyterians' witness in their own countries, even leading to greater insecurity and violence toward Christians in some parts of the world. Our ability to work together in unity with these vital members of the worldwide church would be lost.

Result #8: There would remain no way for the national church to legislate *anything* anymore. In the name of "putting right what went wrong in the Kenyon case" from the 1970s (about a candidate who wouldn't ordain women), this A.I. would allow any part of the Constitution to be treated as optional. Thus, the ability to secure the will of the church through our church polity would be effectively lost. Nothing could stick if anything can be deemed inessential.

Result #9: Attempts would be made to shame us into somehow "honoring" what is false and antithetical to God's will. Falsehood, immorality, and defiant rebellion against God's Word and will are not to be tolerated, not to be honored! In a stirring historical passage in our Book of Order, we read: "That truth is in order to goodness; and the great touchstone of truth, its tendency to promote holiness, according to our Savior's rule, 'By their fruits ye shall know them.' And 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" (G-1.0304). Honor falsehood? Bring it on a level with truth, as if it were of no consequence? No way!

Result #10: All of this would happen as an end run around the repeatedly stated will of presbyteries and churches. One set of commissioners at one General Assembly could pass an authoritative interpretation, and—whoosh!—out would go two thousand years of Christian belief and practice, thirty years of Presbyterian discernment to the contrary, and three conclusive national votes among

presbyteries. Out it would go with a gasp, and there would be no vote by presbyteries.

You've heard of the tyranny of the urgent? How about the irony of detergent? I remember a grade school classmate who demonstrated that water and oil do mix if you add a pinch of magic powder: detergent. It was a cool demonstration. The irony of detergent is that it makes the unmixable mix. The Task Force Report tries to be a magic powder that mixes two unmixable convictions. What we get, however, is not a pleasant blend; it is instead a slick, oily emulsion that will disgust those who examine it and cause the Presbyterian Church to slip into further disarray.

How, then, can we keep this from happening?

We who see clearly need to stand boldly. I love Martin Luther's fire and conviction, when he proclaimed he couldn't bend, "Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason...." I admire how he said, "My conscience is captive to the Word of God.... [T]o go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me, Amen."

Yes, amen! People need a clear trumpet to follow. They need refreshing moral clarity, and the Report is anything but clear. So what must we do?

We must respond theologically. By that, I mean several things.

- First, we must be profoundly biblical. The church doesn't need any more sociological, political, anthropological, psychological, or merely pragmatic words. We need the Word!
- Second, prayer and the power of the Holy Spirit must undergird and overshadow everything else we do. This is not *our* job. *We* cannot do it. But God can do it. God is doing it. And God will use us in doing it.
- Third, we must be centered firmly on God's glory, made clear in God's will. This needs to be about God and what God has told Christians about how to live.

There is the great biblical stream of unity or oneness, given its most moving description in John 17. But the oneness is not politically manufactured; it derives from closeness to Jesus and conformity with his will for our lives. The closer we draw to Christ, the closer we get to all those who follow Christ.

And there is another great biblical stream of purity or holiness. Early on in Leviticus, we are told, "You shall be holy to me; for I the Lord am holy, and I have separated you from the other peoples to be mine" (Lev. 20:26). Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt. 5:48). What we do with our lives and bodies matters greatly to our Lord and Savior, and this task needs to be one of our ways of conforming to God's will.

- Fourth, we dare not descend to lesser ends. This struggle cannot become some socially conservative quest just to comfortably keep habits the way they've always been. That's too self-serving, too little an end! This is about God. We cannot be in this to wield political power or so that "our side wins." What hubris that would be! What we are called to do is to "contend for the faith that was once entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3). Let's keep it on that plane.
- Fifth, if we rightly value faithfulness in biblical morality and orthodoxy of belief, then we must give at least as much consideration to the purity of our intentions and methods. To pursue a noble end by ignoble means would be a disgrace.

We must think tactically. There are many ways to skin a cat, many means to reach our end. Here are a few:

Tactic #1: Lift up integrity. Deep down, the vast majority of Presbyterians desire integrity. Even many who seek far different ends will stir to a call for integrity. For instance, just plain integrity forces an honest person to concede that G-6.0106b, when it was proposed, was considered entirely *essential* by those who fought to try to defeat it then. So how could it be honestly deemed nonessential by the same people now? It can't—not without them trashing their integrity. Let's call people to be their noblest selves!

Tactic #2: Use all the tools of connectional Presbyterian polity. There are so many things that we can do. I think of statements that explain and clarify the situation, such as the joint statement by renewal group leaders, or the fine statements by the Lay Committee, the Presbyterian Coalition, and PFR. Use them! Write more.

We need to put good information into people's hands and get important ideas lodged in commissioners' minds. Right now, the Task Force members are fanning out to visit sixty-three presbyteries, three synods, and six other large gatherings, by latest count. Their Report is, of course, being distributed and publicized by the denominational publicity mill. Already the Stated Clerk has broadly commended it, as have the denominational seminary presidents.

The train is building up steam, and by the time it gets to General Assembly, the pressure to just hop on the approval band wagon will be intense. We need every countervailing measure to put a better message across. Already good people are at work to formulate more resources. All of us need to carry the word to the farthest reaches of the denomination. People simply must hear another side of the story on this Report—one that they won't hear from the Task Force itself, or through the denominational apparatus.

General Assembly needs to receive overtures that speak a wiser, more faithful word. Some people are thinking through a substitute report, which a presbytery could adopt as just such an overture. Knowledgeable, skilled, and diligent commissioners definitely will be needed to work

together at General Assembly toward making a substitute report the main report, or toward amending the most damaging parts of the Task Force Report, or toward defeating the Task Force Report altogether. Our polity provides such opportunities.

Tactic #3: Grassroots organizing. Hardly anything important happens nationally all at once, without first happening one conversation, one church, one community at a time. Renewal-minded Presbyterians need to be about the task of organizing every presbytery, every commissioner to General Assembly. Time remains in many presbyteries to elect solid commissioners. Time remains to talk with commissioners who are going to G.A. and explain concerns with the Report. Time remains to counter misinformation and present sound information in the public square. Truth is with us. Logic is with us. Fairness is with us. The biblical and theological arguments are on our side. We just need to do it.

We must operate pastorally. This is key. Specifically, we must love first and always. Jesus gave us the two Great Commandments: to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. That's a great plan by which to operate.

To love God. This simply must be our central motivation. We take on this struggle because we love God. Period. Nothing else dare replace the love of God as our prime motivator. If we didn't love God, why else would we care?

To love our neighbor. Because some of our liberal counterparts readily posit dark and nasty motivations for our behavior—most, one might suspect, saying more about their own motivations than ours—we must doubly demonstrate the truth that this entire undertaking is about love. *The* most loving thing that we can do for anyone lost in a besetting sin is to name the sin and plead with the person to repent. Certainly, we'll get blank stares much of the time, if not outright hostility. But that doesn't change what love compels us to attempt.

Why do we have our ordination standards, in the first place? Not for the sake of the church's reputation. Not because heterosexuals got the upper hand and made up rules for everyone. Our ordination standards concern lives that desperately need to return to harmony with God's benevolent plan. In a society eager to misjudge us, we put ourselves on the line, and we do it because we love and we want others to inherit God's love.

God, after all, reproves and disciplines those he loves. We're told it in Rev. 3:19. It's a brilliant tactic. We even see that principle at work in our own lives. Think of it: When do we most show love toward ourselves? Is it when we're permissive with ourselves or when we exercise self-discipline? We love ourselves best through self-discipline, by showing ourselves tough love. We dare not let anyone tell us it's impossible to disapprove, discipline, *and* love, all at the same time. It *is* possible. We do it to ourselves all the time! It's a *necessary* way to love.

The factor of love applies even further: If we cannot enter this struggle out of love, we should get out. Those motivated by genuine love cannot stand beside those unwilling to be guided by love for God, love for those across the aisle, and especially love for those wrapped up in the tragically destructive sin of homosexual behavior. We should have no part with the bully, the intimidator, the patently hostile one. We certainly must move forward vigorously, but we must do it because we love—as God loves.

We must work together. The need is paramount to participate *together* in this grand task of loving God and loving our neighbor through our work on Presbyterian issues. Our history as evangelicals, as renewal-minded persons and groups, as conservatives in a wavering denomination is checkered with petty little skirmishes among ourselves. Someone doesn't size up the situation exactly as I would, or doesn't fight the fight in precisely the manner that I think is required. So I jump to the conclusion that that person *must* be a collaborating coward or a hot-headed schismatic. What arrogant foolishness!

We in the renewal camp are members of the Body of Christ, made up of all kinds of parts and dispositions, talents and callings. We seek the same faithful following of God's will, but we burn different fuels at different rates, operate spontaneously or deliberately, function solo or within structures, follow this course and that, and sometimes even bump around together like Keystone Kops. It's a wonder that God accomplishes *anything* through us! But as comical or even as ineffective as we

sometimes can be, we belong together in the Body and are all rallying to the same cause, all wanting the same outcome, all doing our part. Together.

I encourage my brothers and sisters in Christ to hold on to one another in this crucial hour. We must let go of egos and hobby horses and everybody-must-join crusades, and hold on to one another; drop suspicion and accusation and back biting, and hold on to one another; refrain from speculating and manufacturing fault and denouncing colleagues, and hold on to one another.

Satan absolutely cackles when he gets us flailing at each other, so we need to walk together. Friends, if we don't hang together, we will hang our heads in shame separately before this is finished.

God will not be thwarted. When all is finally said and done, we are with him on the winning team. We cannot lose. I'm not talking church politics; I'm talking life! God chose us—for whatever reason—and he's not letting go. Praise God, and let's go forward with joy and confidence!

Rev. Dr. Jim Berkley, is interim director of Presbyterian Action with the Institute on Religion and Democracy.

For additional information on the Task Force Report and specific actions you can take, go to the Presbyterian Coalition web site
www.presbycoalition.org

How to Read the PUP Report: Picking Up the Rhetorical Clues to What's Important

by Alan Wisdom

The report from the Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church (PUP) has been released (www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity/resources/fullfinalreport.pdf) and is currently available both on the web and in booklet form. This is a long document (45 pages), and the main points are not immediately apparent. Readers can easily be deterred. Perhaps they might find some benefit in a little guidance on how to read the Report.

1. Go for the bold.

The place to start when you are reading a General Assembly document is with the bold-print recommendations. These are what will actually effect action and cause change in the church. Everything else is background and not authoritative. In the PUP Report as currently printed, the recommendations are found at the back. So skip over the first 31 pages and go straight to Section V,

Recommendations, if you want to see what the General Assembly will actually be acting on.

Even in Section V, you will have to separate the bold-type action items from the supporting rationale. If you make these distinctions, you will find that the 45 pages become much more manageable. They all boil down to a couple of pages of bold print that will set policy for the church.

2. Consider the verbs.

The second thing to do with any General Assembly document is to focus on the verbs. These tell you the kind of action that's being proposed. Some verbs are weak: urge, encourage, suggest, recommend. These do not carry the weight of a directive. Other verbs are strong: direct, instruct, mandate, adopt. These verbs should get our attention. Something is to be done. Life could be changing in the church.

3. Now let's sort out the verbs in the PUP recommendations.

- Recommendation #1: “Strongly encourage”; even with the word “strongly,” it’s a weak recommendation.
- Recommendation #2: “Urge”; another weak verb and, therefore, another optional recommendation.
- Recommendation #3: “Commend for study”; this is very weak. Many things “commended for study” go quickly into oblivion.
- Recommendation #4: “Direct the Committee on the Office of the General Assembly (COGA) and urge...other governing bodies.” Now we finally see a strong verb: “direct.” That means we’re getting to the meat of the matter. This one could bring some change. COGA is only directed to “explore” alternatives to parliamentary procedure, so change will depend on COGA’s disposition as it explores. This recommendation may not bring any change to the lower governing bodies, as they are only “urged” to “explore.”
- Recommendation #5: “That the General Assembly adopt the following authoritative interpretation of Section G-6.0108 of the Book of Order”: Now here’s some really strong stuff, at last. We’re going to *adopt* something; it’s going to be *authoritative*, and it deals with our *constitution*. Every Presbyterian should sit up and take notice when he or she hears that kind of language. This authoritative interpretation could change our lives, at every level of the church.
- Recommendation #6: “Strongly encourages”: Now we’re back to the weak stuff. Even the General Assembly itself doesn’t have to pay attention when it “encourages” something. The 2006 Assembly would be perfectly free to adopt the PUP Report, with this “strong encouragement,” and then ignore its own encouragement.

The Assembly could adopt the PUP Report and also propose deleting G-6.0106b. There are large bodies of people, such as the Covenant Network, that will ask the Assembly to do just that. Since the PUP Report and the overtures dealing with G-6.0106b are likely to be sent to two separate committees, this outcome is quite possible.

Note also that recommendation #6 is made logically contingent upon Recommendation #5. So #6 does not really stand on its own. It’s just a subsidiary point.

- Recommendation #7: “Recommends” that the Assembly answer various past overtures and resolutions with the PUP Report. This is just parliamentary housekeeping.

Of the seven recommendations, only two have strong language that demands our attention: #5 especially, and #4 to a lesser extent. Even when we have only barely touched upon the substance of these recommendations, we can safely make a prediction: The debate about the PUP Report will center primarily on Recommendation #5, and secondarily on Recommendation #4. The language gives it away: #5 is the bottom line, the centerpiece, the heart of the Report.

Another clue to the importance of Recommendation #5 is its length. The bold print is twice as long as for any other recommendation. Moreover, the rationale for the recommendation comprises almost half of the entire recommendations section. The Task Force members obviously knew that this proposed authoritative interpretation was where the big debate would be, and they wanted to lay out all their arguments. They didn’t need that kind of space for their other recommendations.

4. A final note on ambiguities.

There are different readings of this Report. Presbyterians with a more “progressive” mindset will not read some passages—such as the crucial Recommendation #5—in the same way as those with a more “orthodox” mindset. I suspect that this ambiguity may be a deliberate strategy of the Task Force. At points where its members may have disagreed, they may have used ambiguous language to cover over those disagreements. Ambiguity, however, is no virtue when we are offering authoritative interpretations of the church’s constitution to set policy for its governing bodies and ordained officers.

Alan Wisdom is interim president of the Institute on Religion and Democracy in Washington, D.C. He is an elder at Georgetown Presbyterian Church in D.C.

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The historical concept of “scrupling” is revived in the Task Force Report. Rev. Toby Brown explains why the particularities of the history do not apply to our situation.

The Limits of Scrupling and The Adoption Act of 1729: The PUP Task Force’s Historical Problem

By Toby Brown

I read with disappointment the portion of the recent report of the Task Force on Peace Unity and Purity of the Church that offered a misleading summary of the intent and substance of the Adopting Act of 1729. To address this, I intend here to briefly analyze portions of the Task Force Report that bring up the historical reference to “scrupling” and its limits, as taken from the Adopting Act itself. The Task Force Report argues in a number of places that it is a historic principle of Presbyterianism to allow differences on “nonessential” points in our theology. They also assert that the Adopting Act can be cited to affirm the principle that each presbytery can be left free to determine what these points are. Here is one portion of the Task Force Report that makes this case (line 716-736—italics mine):

The tension between conscience and forbearance, on the one hand, and respect for the will of the whole body, on the other, has naturally occasioned the questions: What matters of belief and discipline are “essential and necessary” and, thus, require strict conformity, and where in such matters can latitude be permitted? As early as 1729, American Presbyterians faced these questions in relation to ministerial ordination. The then highest judicatory of the church, the synod, adopted the Westminster standards as its basis of faith and required all ministers to subscribe to them. This firmly established the American Presbyterian church as a confessional body with a single set of standards for faith and practice. The question of freedom of conscience under Scripture emerged immediately, however, because some ministers of the synod considered certain articles in the standards to be at variance with, or at least not explicitly enjoined by, Scripture. The synod resolved this conflict of conscience by permitting these ministers and, later, candidates for the ministry to declare their disagreements (“scruples”) with particular articles of the Westminster standards. *It then delegated to the examining body the responsibility for determining whether the candidate’s disagreement concerned an essential article of the church’s “doctrine, worship or government.”* Although the Adopting Act was later modified, it established a precedent that has heavily influenced American Presbyterians’ understanding of their confessional commitments to this day. *Therefore, the church has consistently maintained that certain beliefs and practices are indispensable for the churches theological integrity. At the same time, “differences*

always have existed and been allowed as to [the] modes of explaining and theorizing within the metes and bounds of the one accepted system.

So, we should ask, what were these “certain articles that were at variance with or at least not explicitly enjoined by, Scripture”? What of these “scruples” on which Presbyterians could differ from Westminster? Are there limits? Let’s go to the cited document itself. Here is the relevant portion of the preliminaries of the Adopting Act (italics and underlines mine):

§ 7. Act Preliminary to the Adopting Act.

And in case any Minister of this Synod, or any candidate for the ministry, shall have any scruple with respect to any article or articles of said Confession or Catechisms, he shall at the time of his making said declaration declare his sentiments to the Presbytery or Synod, who shall, notwithstanding, admit him to the exercise of the ministry within our bounds and to ministerial communion if the Synod or Presbytery shall judge his scruple or mistake *to be only about articles not essential and necessary in doctrine, worship or government.*

Scrupling then, was only allowed on articles that are deemed as “not essential.” The Task Force agrees with this point and there is no argument that the Adopting Act did hold all ministers to the essential articles of the Confession. But the point must then be asked: What are these essential and nonessential points and who defines them? What level of disagreement with Westminster was allowed? Were those essential and nonessential articles defined? Yes, they were! The Presbyteries were not left without guidance in these matters. The limits were set, upon how far we could agree to disagree on essential matters, as the next selection shows.

Here is a portion of the actual Adopting Act of 1729: (italics and underlines mine)

§ 8. The Adopting Act.

All the Ministers of this Synod now present, except one, . . . after proposing all the scruples that any of them had to make against any articles and expressions in the Confession of Faith and Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the Assembly of Divines at Westminster, *have unanimously agreed in the solution of those scruples, and in declaring the said Confession and Catechisms to be the confession of their faith, excepting only some clauses in the twentieth and twenty-third chapters,*

concerning which clauses the Synod do unanimously declare, that they do not receive those articles in any such sense as to suppose the civil magistrate hath a controlling power over Synods with respect to the exercise of their ministerial authority; or power to persecute any for their religion, or in any sense contrary to the Protestant succession to the throne of Great Britain.

The above quote shows clearly that the essential matters consisted of *every part of the confession*, except the selected chapters 20 and 23. The unity of faith and witness for these early American Presbyterians was agreed on every point, as outlined in Westminster, except as regards the role of the civil magistrate and church/state affairs. The limits of allowable differences were clearly defined in the Adopting Act for the ordaining bodies, be they Synods or Presbyteries. This Adopting Act can still be a clear model for the church, if we are willing to read it fairly and in its entirety.

Clearly, in referencing the Adopting Act as justification for advocating Presbytery allowance on determining essentials each for itself, as they do later (albeit obliquely) argue in their Recommendation 5, the Task Force

misrepresents the point of the Act itself. Presbyteries and Synods could only allow “scruples” up to a certain and designated point. This was seen as the basis for peace, unity and purity: a doctrine that was held in common by all the ordained officers of the newly organized Presbyterian Church.

There is no room for making the argument that the Adopting Act leaves room for Presbyterians to define for themselves (individually or as Presbyteries) the essentials of the faith from the nonessentials. According to the Adopting Act and the earliest American Presbyterians, the church itself, as a corporate and unified body, decides what is essential and the church then has the duty of defining these essentials.

If the Task Force wants to use our history or confessions to argue for a de facto Local Option on essential matters of faith and practice for ordination, as they do in Recommendation 5, then they should have looked elsewhere for support! The Adopting Act speaks for itself, if only we will take the time to listen.

Rev. Toby Brown is pastor of First PC, Cuero, TX and member of the Presbyterian Historical Society.

The Strange Legacy of the Auburn Affirmation

by Paul Leggett

The Auburn Affirmation is a major part of Presbyterian history and exerts a significant influence to the present day. The Auburn statement was referred to at the 2004 General Assembly in Richmond as providing guidance for the evaluation of ministerial candidates. Many, in the more moderate and liberal wing of the church, regard it positively as a statement of Christian freedom and a way of maintaining a proper balance between confessional faithfulness and personal conscience. Others, from a more conservative or evangelical perspective, have viewed it with suspicion. So, what’s the real story?

The Auburn Affirmation was drafted in Auburn, New York in 1924 as a response to actions taken by the 1923 General Assembly of the then northern Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. By the time it had circulated throughout the denomination it had been signed by over 1200 leaders in the Presbyterian Church. This was at the height of the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy and many to this day believe it set the stage for the resolution of that conflict and indeed has been a de facto guide ever since. Its citation at the 2004 General Assembly, exactly eighty years after its drafting, testifies to its continuing influence.

The 1923 General Assembly had endorsed a set of “five fundamentals” as essential beliefs for the church. These

were hardly unique to the Presbyterian Church since much of Protestantism was embroiled in controversy over them at that time. The five fundamentals included the inerrancy of Scripture, the virgin birth of Jesus Christ, the substitutionary atonement of Jesus’ death, his bodily resurrection and the claim that Jesus performed genuine miracles during his earthly life. These five points had gained ascendancy in theological and denominational circles during the early years of the twentieth century because these were the doctrines which conservatives perceived to be most under attack.

The five fundamentals had been supported by the 1916 General Assembly and were reaffirmed again in 1923. The truth is that, apart from the precise definition of “inerrancy” with regard to Scripture, the other four had been uncontested affirmations of Christian orthodoxy for centuries. Christ’s virgin birth, sacrificial death and resurrection are mentioned explicitly in the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds. The Westminster Confession of Faith, following earlier Reformed confessions, calls the Scriptures “infallible.” The doctrine of inerrancy as systematically defined in the 1880’s by Princeton Theologians B. B. Warfield and A. A. Hodge was more precise in its understanding of infallibility by extending this to matters of science, history and geography (however

they did so in such a nuanced way that other conservatives accused them of selling out to the emerging liberal theology of the period). Finally, no orthodox Christian church had ever questioned the miraculous element of Jesus' ministry or, for that matter, the miracles attributed to the apostles.

The controversy that had sparked the furor in the Presbyterian Church in the early 1920's arose from two challenges posed by New York Presbytery. The first came from Harry Emerson Fosdick who, while not an ordained Presbyterian, had nonetheless been licensed to preach at the First Presbyterian Church in New York City. Fosdick denied all the points of the "five fundamentals" and had made his position very public in a famous sermon preached in 1922 entitled, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" The second came from the fact that New York Presbytery had licensed two candidates for the ministry who denied the virgin birth of Christ. The response of the 1923 General Assembly was clearly motivated by these events as was Princeton Professor J. Gresham Machen's book, *Christianity and Liberalism*, in which he argued that orthodox Christianity and liberalism represented not different theologies but indeed two different religions.

It was in this context that the Auburn Affirmation was drafted the following year, in 1924. The Affirmation sought to position itself in an historical tradition of Christian freedom which it maintained was authentic Presbyterianism. The Affirmation references the famous quote of the Westminster Confession, "God alone is lord of the conscience and hath left it free from the commandments and doctrines of men, which are in anything *contrary* to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith and worship...."

The Affirmation then goes on to address the response of the 1923 GA to the situation in New York Presbytery. Given Fosdick's virtual denial of the deity of Jesus Christ, the Assembly, following its constitutional responsibility "to bear testimony against error in doctrine," had gone on to declare that "doctrines contrary to the standards of the Presbyterian Church" had been preached by Fosdick at First Presbyterian Church. This could hardly be denied. It was probably Fosdick, more than any other Liberal spokesperson that H. Richard Niebuhr had in mind when he made his famous statement that Liberal Christianity proclaimed a version of the gospel in which "a God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross" (*The Kingdom of God in America*, p. 185).

In the wake of the controversies following the 1923 Assembly the Auburn Affirmation was drafted to state an evangelical "middle way" for the church to follow. By the 1929 Assembly it had essentially become the unofficial position of the Presbyterian Church. Since then it has continually been lifted up as a model for the present church. It has again been invoked with reference to the current Task Force Report on Peace, Unity and Purity.

The fact however is that the Auburn Affirmation, instead of offering any middle ground, actually offers no ground. The hindsight of history has to be that it did not strengthen the church in its era nor can it do so now.

Scripture is not a reliable source of God's Word

There are three essential failings of the Auburn Affirmation which rob it of its claim to be either a mediating position or a statement in conformity to "the teachings of evangelical Christianity." The first and most serious failing has to do with its view of Scripture. In a telling phrase the Affirmation refers to receiving all truth "which from time to time" God causes to break forth from the Scriptures. Here is perhaps the first clear intimation of the distinction of Scripture from the Word of God as in the phrase, "Scripture contains the Word of God" or, liturgically, "Listen *for* the Word of God." Since it is only "from time to time" that God brings forth his truth from the Bible, Scripture cannot then be a reliable source of God's Word on a consistent basis.

The Affirmation then goes on to state, disingenuously, that the Scriptures never claim to be free from error thereby rejecting the 1923 Assembly's claim that the writers of Scripture were kept "from error." They claim that the Westminster Confession never makes this statement either. This claim can only be made on the flimsy ground that the exact wording "without error" does not appear in Scripture or the Westminster Confession. First of all, Westminster does refer to "the infallible truth" of Scripture (Book of Confessions 6.005). Certainly its authors did not know of the later subtle distinction between "infallibility" (matters of faith and belief) and "inerrancy" (all subjects including history, cosmology, science). For the Westminster authors, as their sermons and writings make clear, any thought of Scripture containing error was completely alien.

Scripture itself refers time and again to writing down the exact words of God. These texts are therefore the truth of God. God himself writes the words in some cases (Ex. 34:1). Other times the issue of divine inspiration ("God breathed") is spelled out explicitly (Ex. 34:27; Jer. 30:1-2; Habakkuk 2:2). Scripture, the written word, cannot be separated from Christ the living Word (John 5:39; Luke 24:44-45). Jesus himself says literally that not one jot or tittle will pass from the law until all is fulfilled (Matt. 5:18). Second Peter can speak of the epistles of Paul as "scripture" (II Peter 3:16). Revelation warns against adding or taking away "the words of the prophecy of this book" (Rev. 22:18-19). If all (or every) Scripture is "God breathed" (II Tim. 3:16) then the Scriptures are the Word of God and "the sum of your word is truth" (Ps. 119:160).

GA authority to bear witness against error undermined

The second major failing is their criticism of the 1923 Assembly's declaration that "doctrines contrary to the standard of the Presbyterian Church" had been preached by Fosdick in First Presbyterian Church, New York. Auburn objects to this on very confusing grounds. After

admitting that the Assembly has the responsibility to “bear witness against error in doctrine,” they proceed to take the opposite position by saying, that in so doing, the Assembly has virtually pronounced a judgment against First Presbyterian Church without going through the disciplinary process outlined in the Book of Discipline. More seriously, Auburn maintains that an Assembly’s attempt to “bear testimony against error” is “without binding authority.” They then seem to make the rather astounding claim that the Assembly cannot declare what the Presbyterian Church states in its confessions without a concurrent action of the presbyteries. They thereby raise the question as to the point of having either a confession of faith or a constitution.

The 1923 Assembly wasn’t defining or revising church doctrine. They were simply calling attention to what the Westminster Confession states and saying that Fosdick’s preaching was contrary to it. Considering that Fosdick denied most of the so-called “five fundamentals” this was hardly a case of the Assembly overstepping itself. Auburn creates a needless controversy by essentially identifying the idea of bearing testimony to the Confession with that of establishing or creating doctrine. The 1923 Assembly was in no way trying to present or state a new confession or doctrinal statement. They were applying an existing standard to a present situation, the basic thing they were (and still are) required to do (Book of Order G-13.0103 p). Auburn ultimately undermines the authority of a General Assembly to make any statement regarding doctrine or belief. If Fosdick’s preaching in the 1920’s could not be called doctrinal error then nothing could. The legacy of Auburn is to paralyze the General Assembly from speaking out in terms of its own confessional standards.

Doctrine redefined as “theory”

The third, and most serious, error of Auburn is its very radical redefinition of doctrinal statements as “theories.” They essentially say that the “great facts and doctrines” of the faith may be explained by whatever theory we want to use to interpret them. This is saying more than that there is room for interpretation in stating church doctrine. For Auburn the 1923 Assembly did not affirm basic doctrines, e.g. the virgin birth of Christ, the atonement, the bodily resurrection, etc. Rather they set forth “particular

theories” of these “great facts and doctrines.” Is the virgin birth of Christ a doctrine or a theory? The distinction is far from clear. Auburn seems to be saying that as long as we affirm the virgin birth, for example, as one of “the great facts and doctrines,” we can use whatever theory we want to explain it. In other words, the virgin birth, or for that matter, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, can be interpreted as an historical event, a symbolic description, a parable, a myth or whatever. The net result of this leaves “the teachings of evangelical Christianity” without any meaningful definition, the very thing that centuries of confessional affirmation on the part of the church had sought to accomplish.

The writers of the Westminster Confession (or any other confession) hardly saw themselves as setting forth a list of theories about doctrine. They believed that they were stating biblical truth for the church. There are of course parameters of interpretation in any confession. However to say, for example, that the doctrine of the incarnation could be interpreted as a theory that Jesus had a “God-consciousness” and not that he was genuinely God in the flesh makes a mockery of the precision of all confessions from Nicea to the present day.

The Auburn Affirmation wants to be faithful to the doctrines of the church reiterated in the Westminster Confession and then, at the same time, define liberty of conscience so broadly that doctrine becomes reduced to theory. It can’t have it both ways. The Auburn Affirmation stands neither for fidelity to Reformed doctrine nor true Christian freedom. Its legacy to the church continues to be ambiguity and confusion.

Paul Leggett, Ph.D. is pastor of Grace Presby Ch, NJ.

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