

II. The Issues Before the Task Force

The Task Force was charged to lead the church “in spiritual discernment of our Christian identity in and for the 21st century.” Four issues were named for specific attention: ***Christology, biblical authority and interpretation, ordination, and power.*** The Task Force was not asked to resolve all the controversial issues in the church or to relieve the church of all conflict. Rather, the Task Force was asked to help the church deal with current and future conflicts more faithfully.

To this end, the Task Force has studied the assigned topics, reading relevant documents and engaging in discussion under the guidance of Task Force members who are skilled in teaching and group leadership. Drawing on these sessions, we have produced a variety of resources. We also sent to the 216th General Assembly a preliminary report that expressed our shared conviction that the church’s peace, unity and purity are the results not of human efforts but rather of what God has given in Jesus Christ through the gracious work of the Spirit. The task of the church is to live into the fullness of that gift. The General Assembly received that report and commended it to the church for study. Now, in this final report, we address the specific issues in our mandate, building on the theological affirmations in the first section. Below we outline our points of agreement about three issues in our mandate. These points of agreement, given the range of our differences, may provide help for the church to work toward shared positions on the topics of Christology, biblical interpretation and ordination and human sexuality. The fourth issue, the broad topic of power, required multiple approaches. We address it in the next section on ecclesiology, polity, discernment and decision-making processes.

Christology

The term “Christology” points to a vast theological territory of teachings on the person and work of Jesus Christ. No doubt it was included in the Task Force mandate as an issue because there have been strenuous arguments in recent General Assemblies about how to talk about the saving power of Jesus Christ in a pluralistic age. The Task Force decided to approach Christology first from the standpoint of historical tradition. We studied classic creeds and contemporary confessions, with special attention to what they teach about the person and saving work of Jesus Christ.¹ This study included several sessions on the Nicene Creed, the work of the Council of Chalcedon, and the doctrine of the atonement,² as well as a review of three twentieth century confessional statements that are anchored in Christological affirmations.³

¹ We were greatly aided in our preliminary work by the document “The Confessional Nature of the Church,” Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) General Assembly, 1986.

²Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church. “Who Is Jesus Christ,” video, produced by the Office of the General Assembly (OGA-04-069), Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)...

³ [Reference to earlier material in section 1 on these confessions/statements.]

41 We, the members of the Task Force, were shaped by our study together of the
42 affirmations that the church has made through its history about Jesus Christ, in whom we
43 receive life and salvation. Our understanding of him was expanded and deepened in the
44 following ways:

- 45
46 1. We were inspired by the power that the affirmation “Jesus is Lord” and other
47 traditional Christological formulas have to shape faith and discipleship in our day.
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- 49 2. We were instructed by a breadth and variety of Christological affirmations that
50 have been accepted as Christian and Reformed doctrine and chastened about our
51 own tendencies to oversimplify our claims about Jesus Christ in contemporary
52 debates.
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- 54 3. We were encouraged by the witness of Reformed Christians in Germany, South
55 Africa, Korea and other parts of the world who risked their lives in the twentieth
56 century to confess that Christ is alive in contemporary events. We were equally
57 encouraged by Christians who continue today to witness to Christ’s work in the
58 world.
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60 We found wide and deep common ground in our study of the church’s
61 confessional tradition concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ. We have given
62 voice to our shared convictions in the Theological Reflection that heads this report. We
63 have seen the reflection of Christ’s glory in one another. Our growing awareness of this
64 common faith in Christ has become the basis of our unity and of our fear of the
65 consequences of losing each other. This faith gives us hope, indeed, assurance that we
66 should hold on to each other and bear with each other as we grapple with the other
67 difficult issues before the church.
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69 Biblical Authority and Interpretation

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71 The Task Force addressed differences about biblical interpretation and authority,
72 which many Presbyterians believe are a root cause of other disagreements, in three ways.
73 First, we engaged in Bible study throughout every meeting—indeed, on almost every day
74 of every meeting, focusing on texts pertinent to our other discussions. Second, we
75 reviewed different models of biblical authority and interpretation that our Presbyterian
76 forbears employed to read the Bible faithfully and that continue to co-exist to this day.
77 We also reviewed the classic guidelines for interpretation that Presbyterians share despite
78 diversity of perspective on the nature and authority of scripture. These include:
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- 80 a. The centrality of Jesus Christ
- 81 b. The priority of the plain sense of the text
- 82 c. Interpretation of scripture by scripture
- 83 d. The rule of love

e. The rule of faith⁴

Last, we examined with great care essays by scholars, church leaders and church committees that offered biblical perspectives on human sexuality, in order to understand how the Bible is used in making theological arguments and why different interpreters come to different conclusions from their study of it.

These exercises have led the Task Force to agree on four points:

1. In order to allow the scriptures to speak to us clearly and fully, the Reformed approach continues to embrace a variety of models of biblical authority and interpretation, each highlighting values that Presbyterians have historically held to be important.
2. The Task Force discovered a surprising measure of agreement about guidelines, methods and resources for biblical interpretation. Often church members agree on what particular passages mean and many points of interpretive detail. Some of the most serious disagreements focus on what constitutes faithful pastoral application of scriptural teaching or on which passages of scripture are relevant to a particular question.
3. Studying the scriptures together enriches our understandings, corrects our misunderstandings, and helps us wrestle with God’s Word more deeply and honestly.
4. We agree that because God alone is Lord of the conscience and because conscience is bound by the witness of scripture, it is important within these bounds to respect one another’s deep convictions of conscience and to exercise mutual forbearance, as together we seek to discern God’s will.

Each of us became firmly convinced that all the members of the Task Force honor the authority of scripture, embrace it as “the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal” (G-14.0207 b.), and seek earnestly to be faithful to that witness. The fact that we who disagree on some matters can learn so much from each other as we mine together the scriptures we love is further reason for Presbyterians, who share such rich traditions of Biblical interpretation, to continue together in fellowship. The Task Force is convinced that scripture has the power to shape and transform us as the community of faith.

⁴“A summary of these guidelines was presented in the Task Force video, “Seeking Peace, Unity, and Purity,” produced by the Office of the General Assembly (OGA-03-069), Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). That summary was based on two significant resources adopted by the General Assembly at the time of Reunion in 1983: “Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture,” Presbyterian Church in the United States, General Assembly, 1983; and “Biblical Authority and Interpretation,” United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America General Assembly, 1982.

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123 Sexuality and Ordination
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125 The Task Force gave sustained attention to two interconnected issues that have
126 generated more disagreement and conflict in recent years than any others: 1) the church's
127 teaching on human sexuality; 2) the theology and practice of ordination.
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129 We explored a range of opinions on issues of human sexuality. Though we have
130 shared some of our personal opinions and positions, we focused our studies primarily on
131 the careful written work of Christian scholars and denominational commissions and
132 assemblies.⁵ We read and discussed a diverse collection of theological and biblical
133 writings on these topics.⁶ We benefited greatly from this way of grappling with issues
134 and we commend it to the church. Before articulating personal perspectives, groups that
135 find themselves in conflict over issues might attempt what we did: close and careful
136 reading, in a group setting, of carefully-prepared texts that represent a variety of
137 perspectives.
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139 Our study of human sexuality yielded several major insights:
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- 141 1. The theological and biblical literature on human sexuality in general and same-
142 gender sexuality in particular is diverse, subtle, and complex. It could not readily
143 be divided into the two categories— either approval or disapproval of same-
144 gender relationships and practices—that are assumed to anchor much of the
145 conflict in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) today. In one session the Task Force
146 studied a typology of six positions offered by one of our members. Each position
147 conveyed a distinctive view of sin, reconciliation and redemption. We
148 acknowledged that other analysts might approach the material differently and
149 provide alternative interpretations.⁷
150
- 151 2. Methods of biblical interpretation, theological traditions, and policy conclusions
152 did not line up neatly in the work we studied. As the teaching paper, “title”
153 demonstrates, scholars and writers who reached different conclusions often based
154 their work on similar theological premises⁸
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156 Further, opinions about ordination and sexuality did not always correlate precisely
157 with particular theological positions. Writers associated with a particular
158 theological perspective sometimes reached conclusions different from what is

⁵ we will need to produce a full bibliography of resources.

⁶ Will need catalog of articles, here or elsewhere

⁷ [REFERENCE TO THE FORTHCOMING PAPER “THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON HUMAN SEXUALITY”]

⁸ One surprise was how often writers on all sides of the questions bolstered their arguments with appeals to natural law (theological reasoning based on the orders of nature), which is not traditionally a central theme in Protestant theology.

159 often assumed to be their party's "line" on the witness of scripture, the morality of
160 covenantal, same gender relationships, and the permissibility of ordination. For
161 instance, some conservative writers who believe that same-gender relationships
162 are wrong nevertheless believe pastoral acceptance should be extended to gay and
163 lesbian couples; some liberal writers who believe that the full witness of scripture
164 supports the possibility of covenantal relationships between persons of the same
165 gender nevertheless acknowledge that where scripture speaks explicitly of same-
166 gender acts it disapproves them. These were only two of a number of
167 combinations and permutations of theological, biblical and polity perspectives on
168 the broad topic of sexuality and the narrower one of same-gender relationships.
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- 170 3. Amid all the rich complexity of these studies, all of us deepened our
171 understanding of our own perspectives as well as others. Perhaps most important,
172 all of us found gospel themes and biblical witness in the work of scholars and
173 writers whose theological and polity conclusions on the subject are different from
174 our own.

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176 We also studied ordination. This study, which also involved analysis of the work
177 of others as well as the sharing of personal views, yielded the following key insights:
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- 179 1. One model of Christian leadership that is consistently offered throughout the New
180 Testament is servant leadership. Christians are to imitate Christ in a posture of
181 self-giving and service, and to "outdo one another in showing honor" to others
182 (Romans 12:10) by respectful attention and loving care.
183
- 184 2. Reformed theological tradition emphasizes:
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- 186 a. the common Christian vocation of the entire body, the "priesthood of all
187 believers," in which all members are called by God to promote the ongoing
188 health and maturation of the body of Christ.
 - 189 b. that certain members of the body of Christ are called by God through the
190 voice of the church to lead and nurture the body in its spiritual growth and in
191 mission. These ordained officers must adhere to confessional, governance and
192 disciplinary standards not required for membership.
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- 195 3. Beyond these themes, scripture does not provide a thoroughly developed theology
196 of ordination in scripture, and a theology of ordination has not been clearly and
197 consistently articulated in the development of Reformed and Presbyterian
198 doctrine.⁹ As one might expect, then, ordination has been a source of some
199 confusion and a matter of controversy in our history. From the outset of
200 American Presbyterianism to the present, denominational conflicts have often

⁹ Include reference to PC(USA) 1992 study paper?

201 centered on matters of fitness for ordination.¹⁰ The current controversy regarding
202 issues of human sexuality and ordination is the latest example of this recurring
203 pattern.

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206 The Task Force was not asked to take a position on human sexuality or ordination
207 and we have not attempted to do so. We did invest considerable time and energy in
208 conversation, seeking to understand one another's points of view. We did not try to
209 convince fellow Task Force members of our own perspectives or to decide whether the
210 church's current position should be changed.

211
212 At the same time, we found we could reach ready agreement on several points¹¹ :

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214 1. It is a grave error to deny baptism or church membership to gay and lesbian
215 persons or to withhold pastoral care to them and their families.
216
217 2. Those who aspire to ordination must lead faithful lives. Those who demonstrate
218 licentious behavior should not be ordained.
219
220 3. It is damaging and dangerous to teach that sexual behavior is a purely personal
221 matter that is not relevant for Christian discipleship, leadership and community
222 life.
223
224 4. Sexual orientation is, in itself, no barrier to ordination.

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226 The foregoing agreements left the Task Force with a wide range of theological
227 views and positions before it, all of which seemed to have some grounding in the
228 theological affirmations that head this report. Members of the Task Force reflect this
229 range of views personally. Some strongly support the church's current position; others
230 strongly question it or want to change it; others are still forming their thinking about
231 sexuality and ordination. Many believe that, instead of beginning with the question of
232 ordination, it would be more profitable to frame the question differently: "How are
233 baptized gay and lesbian persons in exclusive, covenanted relationships called to
234 participate in the church in God's gracious drama of creation, reconciliation and
235 redemption?"

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237 We all were able to recognize in the views on sexuality and ordination held by
238 other Task Force members concerns for the peace, unity and purity of the church and the
239 integrity of the gospel. The differences on these matters are strenuous and serious, but

¹⁰ Presbyterians have fought over such issues as doctrinal adherence as a requirement of ordination, the spiritual fitness of those seeking ordination, the transfer of ministerial status from region to region or from another denomination, the ordination of African-American Presbyterians, and the ordination of women.

¹¹ These points of agreement emerged during our theological and biblical studies and other discussions rather than from an assessment of current teachings of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), but all our agreements do accord with statements in documents adopted by the General Assembly. [cite documents]

240 precisely because they are so important, we have been encouraged to stay together,
241 speaking the truth to each other in love, learning from each other, and building up the
242 body.

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244 Further, we were all able to agree: given the richness and complexity of
245 perspectives on these subjects and the evident sincerity, faithfulness and biblically-based
246 convictions of the members of our fellowship who hold them, the church should seek
247 constructive, Christ-like alternatives to the “yes/no” forms in which questions about
248 sexuality, ordination and same-gender covenantal relationships have been put to the
249 church in recent decades. In the next section of this report, we recount our search for
250 models of constructive engagement in the history and polity traditions of the Presbyterian
251 Church and in the practices of decision making of other communities that seek peaceful
252 and righteous life together.

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