

## FINAL REPORT

### Prologue: The Theological Basis of This Report

The Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church was created by the 213<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (2001) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The Assembly set before twenty of us—selected not because we are wiser than others but rather because we are typical of the range and variety of backgrounds, views and values of contemporary Presbyterians—the opportunity of discovering ways that the church can live more faithfully with deep disagreements.<sup>1</sup>

The Task Force was charged to set all its deliberations and conclusions in a **theological** frame. Therefore, threaded through our five years of meetings, has been an on-going process of biblical study, theological reflection and spiritual discernment. We have also examined in depth the topics named in our mandate that are the focus of conflict and disagreement in the church. Serious as these difficulties are, we have still found it possible to discern in our life together the outlines of Christian identity to which, we fervently believe, the church is called.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout this process of theological discernment, we have reminded ourselves that we were not asked to draft a new confession of faith. We do believe, though, that the recommendations we are making should be based upon strong theological convictions. The following theological reflections are an account of conclusions we have drawn from our studies and basic convictions that we recognize as significant. They do not include every topic of theological importance or full developments of the themes we lift up. The language in which they are expressed is a mixture of terms that various Task Force members have introduced; each of us might have chosen some different wording if we were making individual statements. These affirmations have, however, been endorsed by every member of the Task Force as important ingredients of Christian identity in and for the twenty-first century.

The reflections are our attempt to bear witness to the divine-human drama whereby the God who is for us and with us in Jesus Christ calls each of us by the Spirit's power to be for and with one another. The significance of this drama rests in three bedrock convictions:

- that God loves us,
- that God saves us, and
- that God empowers us with a commission and calling.

These three convictions are the basis for our response to three enduring questions of spiritual discernment:

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<sup>1</sup> A roster of the Task Force with brief biographies is appended to this report.

<sup>2</sup> We have been encouraged in our work of theological discernment by recent experiences of church bodies voicing theological convictions for the church, notably the statement “Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ” which was affirmed by the 211<sup>th</sup> General Assembly and generally lauded for its clarifying and unifying power.

- What does the loving revelation that is ours in Jesus Christ enable us to know?
- What does this saving revelation prompt us to hope?
- What does this empowering revelation call us to do?

**Theological Reflection:**  
**Discerning Our Christian Identity in and for the Twenty-first Century**

God Loves Us: The Ground of Our Faith

What do we know about the identity of God? And what is the Christian identity that flows from this knowledge?

As Christians, we are a people whose identity is centered in the love of the triune God—the God of all times and all peoples, the God of grace whose love and judgment extend to every creature. God our savior has pursued us in our waywardness like a shepherd who goes into the wilderness to find the sheep that is lost, like a waiting father who longs to welcome a prodigal child home, like a woman who searches for a lost coin and rejoices upon finding it (Luke 15). Like a parent whose hands follow behind and before the walking child (cf. Psalm 139:5), God's Spirit guides and protects.

As the Nicene Creed teaches, this one God is the triune God: eternally Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Belief in the Triune God runs throughout the confessional tradition of the church, and the renewal of Trinitarian conviction has been a major theme of theology in our time. Presbyterians look to the church's historic confessions to nourish that conviction. The Task Force urges the church to continue to renew this core commitment of the faith.

Our faith is in the God of Israel who raised Jesus Christ bodily from the dead. This is the one faith confessed by the people of God: "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all, and through all, and in all (Ephesians 4:5-6). This one faith is diverse but not divided. It is because God is at work in every age that the Reformed family of churches has embraced many confessions across the centuries as a cloud of witnesses to one true faith. Reformed churches have long maintained fellowship with other Reformed churches that look to different confessional statements. In contrast to other communions that have a single teaching office or a single confession drawn from a particular moment in history, Reformed churches have insisted that there is no teacher but Jesus Christ. Therefore the church's many confessions are subordinate to and grounded in Scripture, which speaks afresh in every age. It is by following Jesus Christ, as attested for us in Scripture, that the unity of our faith will be made visible today as it has in the past; and it is this one historic faith that will carry the church into the missional future that God is setting before us.

As the church works together to find the way forward, many questions are being raised about religious pluralism, about the nature of religious truth, and about the reach of salvation in Jesus Christ. In responding to these questions, it is important to affirm that salvation rests not in any merit of our own but in the sovereign love of God that has been made known to us in Jesus

88 Christ. Moreover, we must remember that the truth of the Gospel rests on the power of God, not  
89 on the power of the church. Therefore, in addressing questions of pluralism, truth, and salvation,  
90 we must emphasize both the necessity and sufficiency of the grace by which God is for and with  
91 the world in Jesus Christ. With confidence in this divine grace, we affirm: “Jesus is the way  
92 and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through [him]” (John 14:6) and  
93 “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals  
94 by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

95  
96 We are a people whose identity is rooted not in any merit of our own, but in God adopting  
97 us through grace. Through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit we have been adopted  
98 into God’s family (Romans 8:15, 23; Galatians 4:5-6). We worship and serve a covenant-making  
99 God, the God of Israel, whose unbreakable covenant with Abraham, Sarah, and their progeny is  
100 now, by the raising of Jesus Christ from the dead, extended to the Gentiles, who are grafted into  
101 the covenant by God’s mercy and made to be children of Abraham only by God’s grace. In this  
102 covenant we have a new vision of what the human family is called to be. Because of the  
103 obedience of Jesus Christ, even unto death, we no longer define power as domination over others,  
104 for we experience strength made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9; 1 Corinthians 1:18-  
105 2:13). Therefore we can no longer accept a hierarchical or patriarchal view of how divine power  
106 makes itself felt among us. Our relations to others are transformed and reoriented, because the  
107 love of God is not confined to the people of one religious perspective, or of one social or  
108 economic class, or of one race or ethnicity, or of one gender or gender orientation. Such is the  
109 love of God that for those who are in Christ “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer  
110 slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Jesus Christ” (Galatians  
111 3:28).

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113 We are a people whose identity is expressed through the proclamation of the Word. As  
114 Reformed Christians, “we believe and confess the canonical Scriptures of the holy prophets and  
115 apostles of both Testaments to be the true Word of God, and to have sufficient authority of  
116 themselves, not of [human beings]” (Second Helvetic Confession, 5.001). The scriptures,  
117 illumined by the Holy Spirit, form our identity and teach us who we are, whom we worship, and  
118 how we exist in the world as the body of believers.

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120 We acknowledge that there is heated debate over biblical interpretation among  
121 Presbyterians who honor the authority of Scripture. In the midst of these debates it is important to  
122 remember that the consciences of us all are bound by the witness of scripture. Even as it is  
123 important to preserve freedom of conscience in the interpretation of Scripture, such freedom is  
124 subject to standards (G-6.0108a) and must be exercised within constitutional bounds (G-  
125 6.0108b).<sup>2</sup>

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127 We are a people whose identity is sealed in the waters of baptism. Baptism “in the name  
128 of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19) initiates us into the community  
129 of faith and attests to a God-given identity that can never be erased. This is an identity more  
130 enduring than all other identities we ourselves or others may give us. Our relationship to one  
131 another in the household of God is grounded in this identity alone.

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<sup>2</sup>[QUOTE G-6.0108 IN FULL IN THIS NOTE]

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We are a people whose identity is nurtured in the sharing of bread and cup. Just as we have been baptized into Christ's life, death and resurrection, so also are we sustained in our life together through Christ's presence in the sharing of the Lord's Supper. This meal of thanksgiving is a place where we receive the grace of God; confess our sins before God and one another; continually embrace the reconciliation that is ours through the death of Christ; enact our unity in Christ's body; and anticipate the great feast to which people shall come from north and south and east and west to be welcomed and to sit at one table with Jesus Christ as host (Luke 13:29). The ultimate consummation proclaimed in this meal dignifies our diversity, seals our unity, and even reverses our assumptions about our own and others' acceptability, for in that day "some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last" (Luke 13:30; cf. Matthew 8:11-12).

We are a people whose identity is strengthened through discernment and service. Our Christian identity is firmly established in election. God created us all in God's very image and called all of us by name. We are not elected to an elevated status but to a special service—to embody God's purposes in and for the world. Our given Christian identity, however, requires ongoing discernment. Although God knows us fully, we do not always think and act as though we know God. Embodying God's purposes in our time and place requires that we rely on God's grace and cultivate wisdom, committing ourselves to faithful prayer, study, worship, and works of mercy and justice. We must seek the will of God revealed in the Scriptures by the Holy Spirit as we discern our unique calling in these unique times.

#### God Saves Us: The Object of Our Hope

What is our hope? Our hope is alive through the power of Christ's resurrection. "For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life" (Rom 5:10). We confess that Jesus Christ is Savior and Lord, who has broken the power of sin, death and evil.

Holding firm to this confession, we commit ourselves to the core convictions of Christian faith in the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments. Guided by chapter two of the Book of Order, we embrace the faith of the church catholic (universal), the faith of the Protestant reformation, and the faith of a Reformed and Presbyterian tradition (G-2.0300-0500), as witnessed in our historic confessions.

We confess the faith of "the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church," receiving its canonical Scriptures, accepting its ecumenical creeds, embracing the mystery of the triune God and the truth of the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ, fully human and fully divine, who shared the exposed and vulnerable condition of all humankind and who gave himself—once and for all—to redeem us from sin and restore us to righteousness.

We confess the faith of the Protestant reformation, including the doctrine of justification by grace through faith, "so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). From this doctrine, we know that all things, including peace, unity, and purity, are gifts that the church receives by faith

176 in the saving work of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection.<sup>3</sup> As heirs of the Protestant reformation  
 177 we also acknowledge that the Bible gives us the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ,  
 178 divine Word mediated and spoken through inspired human words. These writings give us our rule  
 179 of faith and life (Westminster Confession, C-6.002)—our reliable guide in matters pertaining to  
 180 salvation, our light in a world of moral obscurity, our measure of what is theologically truthful and  
 181 spiritually life-giving. These words also reflect the social, cultural, and intellectual conditions of  
 182 their times, so the church approaches scripture with historical and literary understanding as it  
 183 engages in interpretation.

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 185 We confess the faith of a Reformed and Presbyterian tradition, with its core vision of the  
 186 majesty, holiness, and providence of God. From this tradition flow the themes of election,  
 187 covenant, stewardship and the recognition of the human tendency to idolatry. This vision impels  
 188 us to resist the temptation to substitute our own ideologies and forms of thought for the reality of  
 189 God (G-2.0500a.(4)). Guided by the ancient creeds and confessions, we are a church reformed and  
 190 forever being reformed in accordance with God’s Word. Instructed by the confessions of more  
 191 recent years, we seek to be a church that pays attention to what God is continually doing in our  
 192 midst. Living in expectation of God’s reign, we not only look to Jesus Christ as our Lord and the  
 193 Lord of the church but proclaim him the Lord of all. As a pilgrim people, we await the day when  
 194 “every knee shall bend, in heaven and on earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ  
 195 is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:10-11).

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 197 God calls us, in light of our confession, to embrace “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the  
 198 love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit” (2 Corinthians 13:14). Too often, we deny  
 199 the gift of the grace of God. In conflicts between nations and peoples, in strategies that insist on  
 200 win-lose options only, in the separations by color and class, we alienate ourselves from one  
 201 another. We do this even as we worship on the Lord’s Day. God refuses to live on one side or  
 202 the other of these humanly-conceived boundaries and works in and through our differences to  
 203 bring us into the promise of reconciliation, healing, liberation and redemption.

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 205 Through grace we are also enabled to recognize and to confess our fallibility as well as our  
 206 capacity for distorting truth. Christians and churches have too often authored and endorsed false  
 207 and damaging teachings.<sup>4</sup> The humility this engenders should impel us to step back from  
 208 controversies that threaten the peace, unity and purity of the church and to take time to seek the  
 209 truth together. Because of the presence of Jesus Christ in our midst, this stepping back to make  
 210 room for the living God to lead us and guide us by the Spirit can occur every time we meet for  
 211 worship, study and service.

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<sup>3</sup> For this reason, in our Preliminary Report we were bold to claim that Jesus Christ is the source of our peace with God and with one another; that Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of the church’s unity; and Jesus Christ is the source of purity and righteousness to which we aspire, individually and corporately.

<sup>3</sup> In its deliberations, the Task Force paid special attention to several instances of such distortions of truth. We were reminded that many who perpetrated the slaughter of Native Americans in this country were worshiping, believing Christians. We also were reminded that more than half of the tracts and treatises defending the institution of slavery in America were written by Christian ministers, armed with what they thought were sure readings of Scripture and convinced that their side was entirely in the right and the other side entirely in the wrong. We made each other aware of these historical facts not to score ideological points in our current debates but to engender the humility that leads to forbearance and repentance.

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213 God Empowers Us To Proclaim the Gospel: The Source of Christian Love and Witness  
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215 What does the Spirit of Christ empower us to do? Christian identity and confessional  
216 witness call us to proclaim and bear witness to the gospel throughout the world.  
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218 We proclaim the gospel by preaching, teaching and serving. Just as God sent Jesus Christ  
219 into the world for us and for our salvation, so also God sends the church into the world to bear  
220 witness to God's judgment and grace. God entrusts us with the privilege of participating in God's  
221 mission to carry out the great ends of the church, among them the proclamation of the Gospel, the  
222 preservation of truth, and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world. Through our  
223 faithful response to the blessing that God has given us in Jesus Christ, God may in turn use us to  
224 become a blessing to others. .

225 We proclaim the Gospel by leading holy and disciplined lives. The true church is  
226 constituted not only by proclamation of the Word and administration of the sacraments, but also  
227 by discipline that builds up the body and maintains its integrity. Regular and loving discipline  
228 encourages every member of the body to die to sin and live humbly unto righteousness (Scots  
229 Confession, 3.18; Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q 35, 7.035). Through the abundance of  
230 sanctifying grace, we are freed from selfishness, self-indulgence and self-righteousness for a life  
231 that is growing in obedience to God and sacrificial service and fidelity to others. Through the  
232 death of Christ we are invited to a life of piety, simplicity and self-discipline. Through the  
233 ongoing, transforming work of the Spirit, we give our selves, our bodies, and all that we are to a  
234 life that brings glory to God.

235 We proclaim the Gospel by our commitment to peace and reconciliation. We are living in  
236 a war-torn world. The church acknowledges diverse traditions on the morality of war,<sup>5</sup> but all  
237 recognize a just peace as the ultimate will of God and contain a presumption against violence.  
238 We also live in a world where many are afflicted by poverty and injustice. As a North American  
239 church, many of whose members are among the most affluent even while many others are not, we  
240 recognize that the blessings of prosperity bring with them a sacred obligation to care for the needy  
241 both at home and abroad, not only through acts of charity but by supporting structures that  
242 embody God's justice. Having been forgiven by God, we are committed to forgive those who  
243 have wronged us and seek the forgiveness of those we have wronged. Because controversies over  
244 sexuality and ordination have been a special focus of the Task Force's work, the Task Force has  
245 become aware of how much alienation and contempt many have experienced. The Task Force has  
246 heard a call to seek God's forgiveness for our sin and divisive attitudes and actions. In gratitude  
247 for the good news of the gospel, the Task Force prays that God will grant the whole church the  
248 grace of reconciliation, especially with those who have been wronged.

249  
250 We proclaim the Gospel by seeking the righteousness and justice of God. The terrible  
251 crises of the twentieth century provide a framework and direction for our mission in the twenty-  
252 first. With the church at Barmen we believe that "Jesus Christ, as He is attested for us in Holy  
253 Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in  
254 life and in death" (Book of Confessions, 8.11). With the church in Korea, we resolve "that we

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<sup>5</sup> The two most prominent are pacifism and the just war tradition.

255 will follow the footsteps of our Lord, living among our oppressed and poor people, standing  
 256 against political oppression, and participating in the transformation of history, for this is the only  
 257 way to the messianic kingdom.” With the church at Belhar, we affirm “that the church as the  
 258 possession of God must stand where he stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged;  
 259 that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who  
 260 selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others.” We stand with these  
 261 churches in confessing a gospel that looks to God alone for salvation, that upholds justice and  
 262 promotes righteousness, and that excludes no one from the offer of God’s judgment and grace.<sup>1</sup>  
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264 Our love and concern for the church is deeply connected to our love and concern for the  
 265 world. During the five years the Task Force has met, the world, like the church, has experienced  
 266 intense conflict.<sup>6</sup> Conflict forms the context in which our discernment of Christian identity now  
 267 takes place. How can the church bear witness to the conviction that our future lies in God and not  
 268 in our own efforts to secure our lives? In a world of divisiveness and violence, it is essential for  
 269 those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord to show the reason for the hope that is within us by  
 270 dealing differently with one another (1 Peter 3:15), for in Jesus Christ, the church has been called  
 271 to a different way of living. Today especially, as Jews, Christians and Muslims—the children of  
 272 Abraham—are as much enmeshed as any other people in ongoing conflict in the world, our prayer  
 273 to the God of Abraham is to hasten the promised days of messianic peace and to enable the  
 274 Presbyterian Church (USA), in faith, hope and love, to be an instrument to that end.  
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276 *Gracious God, may we look back upon this time of trouble and see that in coming together*  
 277 *to confront our differences, we found a new measure of the peace, unity, and purity, that*  
 278 *are already ours in our loving savior, Jesus Christ our Lord.*  
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<sup>1</sup>The framers of the Theological Declaration of Barman were responding to German Christians, who were allied with the State and who were dictating who could belong to and lead the church based on their degree of Jewish ancestry. The Theological Declaration of the Korean Church was addressed to the situation in which a dictator in 1972 sought to undermine the human rights of the Korean people. The Confession of Belhar was written in 1982 and adopted in 1986 by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church of South Africa. It spoke to the racist policy of Apartheid, which placed the very meaning of the Gospel at risk. These documents can be found at [www.warc.ch/pc/20th](http://www.warc.ch/pc/20th).

<sup>6</sup>In our own country, we have experienced the devastating attacks of September 11, 2001, a war in Afghanistan, another war in Iraq, polarizing presidential elections, controversies over the nature and scope of democracy both here and abroad, and on-going racial tension and cultural division over moral and social issues.