

# **The Advisory Committee on the Constitution Badly Misrepresents the Pittsburgh Overture (06-03), the Sexuality Requirement in G-6.0106b, and the Meaning of the Christian Call to Repentance**

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**The rationale of the 2006 Advisory Committee on the Constitution (ACC) for recommending disapproval of the *Pittsburgh Overture to Safeguard the Amendment Process* (item 06-03, Ecclesiology) is based on a radical misunderstanding, misrepresentation, and/or ignoring of four things:**

- ***The PUP Task Force's own view of Recommendation 5*** as regards whether it permits ordaining bodies to treat the sexuality requirement in G-6.0106b as nonessential (the ACC falsely claims that it doesn't)
- ***The wording of the Pittsburgh Overture***, as regards whether it affirms current constitutional practice in the PCUSA (the ACC wrongly infers that it doesn't) and whether it makes binding those confessional standards singled out in the *Book of Order* and labeled as a "requirement" (the ACC ignores this completely)
- ***The sexuality requirement in G-6.0106b*** as regards whether it provides any specifics about what would constitute "practices which the confessions call sin" (the ACC falsely claims that it doesn't)
- Worst of all, ***Scripture's and the confessions' call to repentance*** as regards whether the church can call a person to repent of practice that he or she does not believe is sinful (the ACC falsely infers that it can't)

It is difficult to imagine how a body charged with advising the PCUSA on the constitutionality of overtures could have done a poorer job in commenting on this overture, the *Constitution*, and the theological meaning of the call to repentance in Scripture and church tradition.

## **I. What the Pittsburgh Overture Seeks to Do**

Let us begin by being clear about what the Pittsburgh Overture seeks to do since the ACC's comment shows little evidence that the ACC understood the overture.

**The Pittsburgh Overture merely preserves the right of presbyteries to set *binding or compulsory* national ordination standards (i.e., "requirements," "mandatory practices") through amendment of the *Book of Order*. In other words, it safeguards an important check-and-balance in the PCUSA.**

This check-and-balance can be compared to the check-and-balance provided by the amendment process in the United States. States can, by national vote, amend the U. S. Constitution to mandate specific national requirements, over against attempts by Congress, the courts, or individual state and local governments to thwart the collective national will. Similarly, the presbyteries of the PCUSA can, by national vote, amend the Form of Government of the *Book of Order* to mandate certain national requirements, over against attempts by the General Assembly, the permanent judicial commissions, and local ordaining/installing bodies to thwart the collective national will of Presbyterians.

**There is nothing radical about the Pittsburgh Overture. It simply states that, barring exceptions stipulated in the *Book of Order* itself, a requirement for ordination ought to be a requirement for ordination. A “mandatory” practice ought to be a mandatory practice**—not just a “strongly recommended,” “commended,” or merely “permissible” practice (see the preface of the *Book of Order* for this fourfold distinction, associated with the words “shall,” “should,” “is appropriate,” and “may” respectively). **Nor is there anything fundamentally new about this proposal. It simply preserves the longstanding and current practice of the PCUSA.** Why, then, seek an amendment to preserve this right?

The reason involves the PUP Task Force’s proposed “authoritative interpretation” of G-6.0108b (“Freedom of Conscience – Within Certain Bounds”). This “A.I.” is really an amendment masquerading as an “authoritative interpretation” so as to circumvent a national vote by the presbyteries. It will give to individual sessions and presbyteries the right to decide which “requirements” and “mandated practices” are “essential” for ordained office and thus binding or obligatory on all candidates (Recommendation 5 of their *Final Report*, lines 1048-72, pp. 35-36). In other words, no matter how strong the wording of the *Book of Order*, every local and regional ordaining/installing body could decide for itself that *any* requirement or mandatory practice is not a barrier to ordination or installation.

Although the proposed “authoritative interpretation” singles out **the sexuality standard** in G-6.0106b as a case in point, there is no reason why the same principle of functional local option could not apply, at least in theory, to **women’s ordination** and to **the first ordination vow** about expressing trust in Christ as one’s Savior and as Lord of all (G-14.0405b). A session or presbytery could refuse to ordain women. Or it could choose to ordain any persons who do not believe Jesus is Savior and Lord. Or it could choose to ordain any persons who are actively engaged in unrepentant homosexual practice, promiscuous behavior, premarital sexual behavior, adultery, ‘faithful’ polyamorous behavior or polygamy, incest, or bestiality.

Although the Task Force says in part “d” of Recommendation 5 that all such decisions are “subject to review by higher governing bodies” (lines 1066-68, p. 36), such review “should” involve only matters of process and not matters of content (so the ACC’s advice on Recommendation 5e in its “advice on Item 06). A higher governing body or judicial commission should focus its “review on whether the ordaining or installing body engaged in a probing and rigorous process, *and not on whether it agreed with the lower governing*

*bodies* [sic] *determination as to what is essential to our faith and polity*” (ACC comment on Recommendation 5, item 06-01, last paragraph, emphasis added).

**Simply put, if the “authoritative interpretation” were approved at this General Assembly, there would be no absolutely *binding* (mandatory, required, obligatory, compulsory) national standard or requirement for ordained officers. None. For all intents and purposes, *every* requirement for ordained officers would be reduced to “recommended” practice.**

Yes, technically the “standards” would still be in place. And the presbyteries by national vote could continue to insert new standards. However, the *Book of Order* would no longer contain, nor could it contain through future amendment, compulsory standards for all ordained officers—at least not so long as the “authoritative interpretation” were in place.

To rectify this problem and to prevent future GAs from attempting to circumvent the clear wording of the *Book of Order*, the Pittsburgh Overture proposes to add a single sentence to the final sentence of G-6.0108b (text to be added shown in italics):

The decision as to whether a person has departed from essentials of Reformed faith and polity is made initially by the individual concerned but ultimately becomes the responsibility of the governing body in which he or she serves. *A specific standard for officers of the church (deacons, elders, or ministers) that the Form of Government of the Book of Order singles out from amongst other confessional standards, explicitly labels a requirement, or associates with mandatory practice by the use of “shall” language or its equivalent shall be deemed by ordaining and installing bodies to be an essential of Reformed faith and polity for officers of the church.*

The premise of this addition is that, if the *Book of Order* singles out for ordination a particular standard from among all confessional standards, specifically labels it a “requirement,” or associates it with mandatory “shall” language, it is a ‘safe bet’ that the standard in question was intended as absolutely binding on all ordained officers, barring any clearly specified exceptions in the *Book of Order* itself. The sexuality standard in G-6.0106b happens to meet all three criteria, making preposterous any claim as to the ambiguity of the binding or compulsory character of the standard.

Local and regional ordaining/installing bodies do not have the license to demote such mandatory national standards to strongly recommended standards (denoted by “should” language), much less to standards that are merely commended (“is appropriate”) or permissible (“may”). Why else would the PCUSA single out in its *Book of Order* a particular confessional standard if not to say that *this* confessional standard, at least, is essential?

An irony here is that, while the Task Force’s proposed “authoritative interpretation” ought to have been put forward as an amendment requiring a national vote of presbyteries since it institutes a change in the *Constitution*, the Pittsburgh Overture’s “amendment” is actually just an “authoritative interpretation” since it does not change any preexisting

practice. But the Pittsburgh Overture is put forward as an amendment so that the national will of the presbyteries could not be subverted or overturned in the future by a mere General Assembly vote.

## II. What the ACC Comment Misrepresents

### 1. *The ACC misrepresents the PUP Task Force’s own view of Recommendation 5*

Even though the ACC purports to be defending the constitutionality of the Task Force’s proposed “authoritative interpretation,” it appears not to understand it very well. The ACC begins by claiming:

The premise of this [Pittsburgh] overture is that the task force recommendation [5] treats G-6.0106b as nonessential. This premise is incorrect. (2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph, 2<sup>nd</sup> sentence)

**Is the ACC right in declaring that the Task Force’s Recommendation 5 does *not* “treat G-6.0106b as nonessential” or, more precisely, does *not allow ordaining/installing bodies to treat G-6.0106b as nonessential? It would appear not, based on the Task Force’s own words*** in its rationale for Recommendation 5:

**If an ordaining or installing body determines that an officer-elect has departed from G-6.0106b, . . . the ordaining/installing body must then determine whether this departure violates essentials of faith or polity. . . . If the departure is judged not to violate the essentials of Reformed faith and polity . . . then there is no barrier to ordination. . . .** (lines 1222-29, pp. 40-41; boldface added)

Question: What is the difference between

(a) the contention of the Pittsburgh Overture’s rationale that “the task force specifically singles out the sexuality standard in G-6.0106b as a standard that could be deemed nonessential, and thus nonbinding”

and

(b) the Task Force’s own statement that an ordaining or installing body could judge an officer-elect’s departure from G-6.0106b “not to violate the essentials of Reformed faith and polity” and so ordain the aforementioned violator?

Answer: There is no meaningful difference. The Task Force’s recommendation 5 enables any ordaining or installing body to treat G-6.0106b as nonessential. This is the Task Force’s interpretation of its own recommendation and yet the ACC denies that this is what the Task Force is saying.

## ***2. The ACC misrepresents, as well as ignores large sections of, the wording of the Pittsburgh Overture***

There are at least two ways in which the ACC grossly misrepresents the Pittsburgh Overture.

**(a) The ACC misrepresents the Pittsburgh Overture by acting as if the Pittsburgh Overture is at odds with the previous practice of the courts and governing bodies of the PCUSA. In fact, it is the ACC’s comments that are at odds with previous and current constitutional practice in the PCUSA** (as noted above). The Pittsburgh Overture does not propose anything different from what has been standard constitutional practice of the PCUSA. It merely seeks to preserve current practice against the threat of unconstitutional change posed by Task Force’s proposed “authoritative interpretation.”

Essentially, **in disapproving of the Pittsburgh Overture, the ACC is ruling that it disapproves of all past national rulings and actions pertaining to mandatory clauses in the Book of Order**—including decisions against scruples regarding women’s ordination (as in *Maxwell v. Presbytery of Pittsburgh*, 1974) and scruples regarding the prohibition of ordaining practicing homosexuals. In the most notable instance of the latter, the **2000 Londonderry decision of the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission** declared that governing bodies must “comply with the express corporate judgment of the Church in an explicit constitutional provision.” Failure to do so, it said, “exceeds the constitutional bounds of freedom of conscience” (citing G-6.0108). It added:

There are no constitutional grounds for a governing body to fail to comply with an express provision of the *Constitution*, however inartfully stated. Assertions of inconsistency, confusion, or ambiguity may justify the right to protest. They do not create a right to disregard any part of the *Constitution*. (*The Session of Londonderry Presbyterian Church v. Presbytery of Northern New England*, 12.1065-66, 1069)

**The GA court rightly understood that ordaining homosexually active persons, whatever the rationale, would be an act of non-compliance with respect to G-6.0106b that, by definition, would “exceed the constitutional bounds of freedom of conscience” allowed by G-6.0108 and thereby “disregard . . . part of the Constitution.”** The Pittsburgh Overture is not proposing anything different from this ruling and yet the ACC is dismissive of it, saying:

The overture [wrongly] assumes that this provision [G-6.0106b] contains an unambiguous standard that the task force report seeks to circumvent. (3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph from bottom, 1<sup>st</sup> sentence)

Yet *all* previous GAPJC decisions and national church actions involving G-6.0106b have assumed that G-6.0106b contains an unambiguous standard as regards the prohibition of homosexual activity by officers of the church. Why did proponents of a two-sex prerequisite for sexual unions and proponents of homosexual unions fight so vigorously to retain or remove G-6.0106b for nearly a decade if the standard were so ambiguous?

Everyone knew, on both sides of the theological aisle, that an absolutely binding standard was in place.

In acting as if the Pittsburgh Overture is offering an amendment that diverges from previous practice of the courts and governing bodies of the PCUSA the ACC distorts the content of the Pittsburgh Overture and covers up its own radical and partisan rewriting of history.

**(b) Even more blatant is the ACC’s refusal to consider the whole of the single-sentence addition to G-6.0108b being proposed by the Pittsburgh Overture—which addition mentions not only the use of mandatory “shall” language in a standard but also the singling out of a specific confessional standard for obedience and the use of the term “requirement.”**

The ACC argues that the Pittsburgh Overture would not “accomplish the intent described in the overture’s rationale” because, allegedly, the “shall” statement in the third sentence of G-6.0106b—“Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained”—does not specify “which practices ‘the confessions call sin’” (last sentence of the ACC’s third-to-last paragraph). We shall explain later why this is bad reading of G-6.0106b. Here we simply note that the Pittsburgh Overture is not stuck merely on the “use of ‘shall’ language or its equivalent.

The proposed addition to G-6.0108b reads:

A specific standard for officers of the church (deacons, elders, or ministers) that the Form of Government of the *Book of Order* **singles out from amongst other confessional standards, explicitly labels a requirement**, or associates with mandatory practice by the use of “shall” language or its equivalent shall be deemed by ordaining and installing bodies to be an essential of Reformed faith and polity for officers of the church. (boldface added)

Now let’s look at the second sentence of the sexuality standard in G-6.0106b to see if this is an ordination standard for officers that the *Book of Order* either “singles out from amongst other confessional standards” or “explicitly labels a requirement”:

Among these [historic confessional] standards [that those called to office are to obey] is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman (W-4.9001), or chastity in singleness.

The answer is obvious. **Clearly, the second sentence of G-6.0106b, which limits officers’ sexual relations to “the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman,” both singles out this standard from among other historic confessional standards and explicitly labels it a “requirement.”** According to the Pittsburgh Overture’s proposed amendment of G-6.0108b, meeting *either* of these two conditions would suffice for establishing the ordination standard as essential. As it is, *both* conditions are met in the second sentence of G-6.0106b. This is a fact that the ACC in its rationale for disapproving the overture completely ignores.

**Obviously, then, contrary to the ACC’s claim, the Pittsburgh Overture would indeed “accomplish the intent described in the overture’s rationale” if approved as an amendment.** It would require ordaining and installing bodies to treat unrepentant sexual activity outside the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman as a violation of an absolutely binding (i.e., *essential*) ordination/installation standard. This, of course, is exactly what even antagonists toward G-6.0106b have believed, including most representatives at successive GAs and the GAPJC—that is, until the PUP Task Force’s recent “revisionist” interpretation and the ACC’s uncritical embrace.

### ***3. The ACC misrepresents the sexuality requirement in G-6.0106b***

The sexuality requirement in G-6.0106b reads:

Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman (W-4.9001), or chastity in singleness. Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as deacons, elders, or ministers of the Word and Sacrament.

As we noted above, the ACC contends that the Pittsburgh Overture would not achieve the effect of making officers’ unrepentant homosexual practice a violation of an essential. The reason, the ACC alleges, is that the last line of G-6.0106b does not specify *which* practices “the confessions call sin.” The ACC claims that in order for the overture “to accomplish the intent set forth in [its] rationale,” it would have to specify “a list of practices that would preclude ordination or installation” (last paragraph, first sentence). The ACC criticizes the Pittsburgh Overture for assuming that G-6.0106b “contains an unambiguous standard [against homosexual practice] that the task force report seeks to circumvent” (third-to-last paragraph, first sentence).

As we have seen above, even if the ACC were correct in its assessment of the *third* line of G-6.0106b, the *second* line of G-6.0106b would still guarantee a two-sex requirement for sexual unions as an essential for officers of the church. But the ACC is not even correct in its assessment of the third line. It is bizarre, to say the least, that the ACC advises a list of what constitutes “practices which the confessions call sin” when the second sentence in G-6.0106b already provides just such a specification. The ACC completely ignores this point.

**While the ACC is correct that one may quibble about the *extent* of the phrase “practices that the confessions call sin,” it is incorrect to assert that G-6.0106b makes no specification of what such a phrase would *minimally include*. For the immediately preceding sentence in G-6.0106b explicitly specifies that “the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman (W-4.9001), or chastity in singleness” is one of “the historic confessional**

standards of the church” that, in particular, “is to” (= shall, must) be obeyed. This is the obvious flipside of saying that **any unrepentant sexual relations outside the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman would be a particular instance of engaging in “practices which the confessions call sin.”**

In short, the ACC completely ignores the immediately preceding context (i.e., the preceding sentence) for determining what “any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin” would minimally include. The ‘three’ most important principles for understanding the meaning of texts is: context, context, context (similar to buying real estate: location, location, location). The ACC disavows this principle when it interprets G.6.0106b. Thus it makes G-6.0106b say whatever it wants to say.

**It comes across as disingenuous for the ACC to state that the intention of the Pittsburgh Overture (and similar overtures) could be met if an amendment or authoritative interpretation were proposed that would delineate “as specifically as possible” which practices the confessions call sin when the ACC utterly ignores one such specification given in the immediately preceding sentence of G-6.0106b.** If the ACC is bent on ignoring this clear specification in sentence two of G-6.0106b, why would a list that would restate this specification and add others have any effect on the ACC’s evaluation?

#### ***4. The ACC misrepresents Scripture’s and the confessions’ call to repentance***

**The most egregious of the ACC’s many misrepresentations, and the one that would destroy classical Christian ethics at its root, is the insinuation that the church cannot call persons to repent of practices that they do not believe to be sin.**

According to the ACC, “a person can only repent [*sic*—repent only] of conduct he or she genuinely believes to be sinful” (third-to-last paragraph, third sentence). Now this is true in the most literal sense since repentance involves a change of mind as well as a change of behavior. (Indeed, the Greek verb *metanoeo*, “repent,” literally means “change one’s mind [opinion, heart]” in the sense of “be sorry,” “regret,” “feel remorse” for one’s sin, with the presupposition that a change of mind/heart will necessarily lead to a change in behavior.) However, such an observation by the ACC, restricted to this literal sense, is meaningless and tautological (i.e., a needless, often silly repetition of the same sense in different words). The ACC’s observation is tantamount to saying: “People can change their mind to think that a given conduct is sinful only if they come to believe that the conduct is sinful.” (A similar tautology: “People can’t stop from engaging in a given practice if they continue to engage in such practice.”) Well, yes, that’s true, but the observation doesn’t advance the discussion one whit.

And yet the ACC, however awkwardly, does try to advance the discussion with this tautological observation. That, in turn, suggests that they intend the observation to say something more than a literal construal might suggest; namely, that a person not only won’t repent but, more, *can’t be called to repentance by the church*, for a behavior that

he or she does not genuinely think to be sinful. If true, this supposition might serve to nullify the third and final sentence of G-6.0106b—“persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained”—at least with regard to persons who engage self-affirmingly in ‘committed’ homosexual unions.

That the ACC is insinuating such is evident from two further points. First, the ACC makes the following distinction between *repentance* and *abstention*:

If a person does not believe conduct to be sinful, he or she may *abstain* from that conduct out of concern for the wellbeing of the community (e.g., 1 Corinthians 8), but he or she cannot be said to *repent* of that conduct. (third-to-last paragraph, fourth sentence; emphasis added)

The inference here is that the church can call someone to abstain from self-affirmed conduct but not to repent of it. Parenthetically, the ACC’s appeal to 1 Cor 8 is entirely inappropriate in this context because Paul did not regard the conduct under discussion in 1 Cor 8 (eating idol meat) as intrinsically sinful. By contrast, Paul *did* consider same-sex intercourse to be intrinsically sinful, just as he did with incest even of an adult consensual sort (compare 1 Cor 5; 6:9). For intrinsically sinful conduct Paul urged full repentance, not just abstention.

Second, **the ACC apparently took a page from a playbook of the Covenant Network** (thanks to Rev. James Tony for pointing this out to me). In November 2003, R. Blair Moffett, Doug Nave, and Peter Oddleifson presented a paper at a Covenant Network conference in Washington, D.C., entitled “Interpreting Book of Order §G-6.0106b.” On p. 8 they wrote:

G-6.0106b focuses on an element of *wilfulness* – a person may be disqualified from ordained service only if “refusing to repent” of what s/he recognizes as sinful. Our confessions establish that “repentance” is a state of inward conviction about the wrongfulness of one’s acts. Many persons in same-sex relationships do not feel any such inner conviction. Rather, they believe that their sexual orientation is a good and natural part of God’s creation that can be responsibly acted on.

Here the train of thought is made explicit: Persons who believe that their homosexual orientation is ‘ordained’ by God are not willfully “refusing to repent.” Rather, they *cannot* repent since they do not believe their conduct to be sinful. As such, they allegedly do not come under the heading of “persons refusing to repent” in the third and last line of G-6.0106b.

So in a partisan fashion the ACC appears to be parroting the Covenant Network’s position that G-6.0106b’s call to repentance is not applicable to persons who do not believe that their homosexual practice is sinful. Furthermore, the ACC does so even though it bears little logical connection to their main point.

- 1) The ACC bases its argument for disapproving of the Pittsburgh Overture primarily on the alleged ambiguity of the phrase “practices which the confessions call sin,” with which the mandatory “shall” is connected in the third and last sentence of G-6.0106b. Asserting, as

- the ACC does, that a person can repent only of something that he or she believes to be sinful is immaterial to the argument about *which* practices the confessions call sin.
- 2) The ACC attempts to link the repentance argument with the ambiguous-practices argument by claiming that the phrase “practice which the confessions call sin” “creates an intersection between belief and practice” (third-to-last paragraph, second sentence). However, the “belief” in question is not the *violinist’s* belief but rather the *church’s* beliefs as expressed in the historic confessions of the church, which in turn are modeled on Scripture. The ACC’s comment about an “intersection” thus misses this point entirely: *the belief that matters here is the church’s, not the violinist’s.*
  - 3) The ACC in a subsequent comment states that G-6.0106b’s alleged lack of specificity in defining *which* practices the confessions call sin leaves room for an ordaining body to ordain even a candidate who “did not believe that some conduct the confessions call sin was not sinful” (an awkward double negative; second-to-last paragraph, second sentence). What is the point of the ACC asserting that a “person can only repent of conduct he or she genuinely believes is sinful” if the ACC wants to argue that even a candidate who believed that his conduct was sinful could still be ordained?

So there appears to be a significant gap in the ACC’s logic when they attempt to correlate the repentance argument with the ambiguous-practices argument. At any rate, their inference that the church cannot call to repentance persons who do not recognize their behavior to be sinful is completely untenable on scriptural and confessional grounds.

**First, contrary to what the ACC and the Covenant Network assume, Christ’s and his church’s call to repentance is *never* contingent upon the offender first concurring with the verdict that his or her behavior is sinful.** The determination of what is sinful is not made by the individual who may be offending but by Christ and his apostolic witness in Scripture, to which the corporate body of the church bears witness, in part, through its confessions. Individuals who attempt to substitute their own understanding of what is sinful for the church’s are, by definition, refusing to conform their thinking and behavior to the confessions. This, in the church’s judgment, is a refusal to repent. **To think otherwise is to arrive at the absurd ethical position that the church has no right to call anyone to repentance for any behavior that is not acknowledged by the perpetrator to be sinful.**

**That the call to repentance in the New Testament retains its validity irrespective of whether the recipients of the call acknowledge their sin to be sin is evident from the fact that the call to repentance is both universal and specific, as is the call to believe in the gospel.**

- 1) Thus, John the Baptist called on Israel to repent in view of the nearness of the kingdom (Matt 3:2), proclaimed a “baptism of repentance” (Mark 1:4 par.; Acts 13:24; 19:4), and demanded that his hearers bear moral fruit worthy of repentance (Matt 3:8 par. Luke 3:8).
- 2) Jesus did likewise, as the Markan summary of his message “Repent and believe in the gospel” indicates (Mark 1:15 par.). Jesus reproached Galilean cities and his generation for not repenting in response to his proclamation and deeds of power, declaring that they would be condemned on the day of judgment (Matt 11:20-21 = Luke 10:13; Matt 12:41 = Luke 11:32). But by the reckoning of the ACC and the Covenant Network Jesus should have required of them *only* abstention from evil, not actual repentance; for surely many of Jesus’ hearers did not “genuinely believe” their conduct to be sinful. According to

Luke, Jesus declared that forgiveness of one's brother follows the brother's repentance, not just abstention (Luke 17:3-4; for other uses of the words "repent" or "repentance" by Jesus in Luke see 5:32; 13:3-5; 15:7, 10; 24:47). In Revelation 2-3 the risen Christ repeatedly calls on churches and individuals in Asia Minor to repent (2:5, 16, 21-22; 3:3, 19; cf. 9:20-21; 16:9, 11).

- 3) Jesus also sent out the Twelve to proclaim repentance: "So they went out and proclaimed that they (i.e., people, all) should repent" (Mark 6:12 par.). In the Book of Acts Jesus' followers continued to make this proclamation after Jesus' ascension (2:38; 3:19; 5:31; 11:18; 17:30; 20:21; 26:20). Acts 2:38 is typical: "Repent and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for forgiveness of your sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." Peter is said to have rebuked the magician Simon in Samaria who attempted to buy the gift of the Spirit, calling on him to repent "in order that the intent of your heart may be forgiven you" and his heart (not just his behavior) may be set right (Acts 8:19-23). A number of other texts in the New Testament explicitly mention the necessity of repentance (Rom 2:4; 2 Tim 2:25; Heb 6:1-6; 12:17; 2 Pet 3:9; texts from 2 Corinthians cited below), to say nothing of an even larger number of biblical texts that promote the concept of repentance without explicitly using the term.

Would the ACC and Covenant Network want to argue that it was inappropriate for the apostle Paul to call to repentance the incestuous man in 1 Corinthians 5 if the latter were not convinced of the sinfulness of his behavior? If not (and one would hope not), then the ACC and Covenant Network are inconsistent. Paul's two explicit references to repentance in 2 Corinthians probably have this incest case partly in view:

(I fear that) I may mourn over many who have sinned previously and who did not repent of the sexual uncleanness and sexual immorality and sexual licentiousness that they engaged in. (2 Cor 12:21)

Now I rejoice, not because you were grieved but because you were grieved into repentance. . . . For grief that accords with God produces repentance that leads to a salvation without regret but the grief of the world produces death. (2 Cor 7:9-10)

It was not enough for the incestuous man in 1 Cor 5, nor would it have been enough for any other participant in sexual immorality (e.g., same-sex intercourse, adultery, intercourse with prostitutes, 1 Cor 6:9-20), merely to abstain from continuance in the intercourse while continuing to regard the intercourse in a positive light. This leads to our next point.

**Second, the ACC's (and Covenant Network's) stance assumes falsely that willfulness plays no part in a person's decision to accept or reject the verdict of Scripture and the confessions on one's behavior. Scripture says otherwise. While the mere experience of an impulse is usually not willful, an individual's moral assessment of that impulse does contain an element of willfulness.**

**This is true even when it involves self-deception owing to a desire to gratify the impulse.** The church is under no obligation to give any credence to an offender's self-deception. The offender remains "without excuse" as Paul makes clear in his argument in Romans 1:18-32 because God has given everyone adequate revelation to know that they

have sinned. Those who disregard or distort this revelation have “suppressed the truth” (1:18). It is within this argument that we find Paul’s key discussion of same-sex intercourse, which Paul characterizes as “sexual impurity” (*akatharsia*), “dishonoring their bodies,” “dishonorable passions,” use of the body “contrary to nature,” and “indecent” or “shamelessness” (1:24-27; compare 2:4: “God’s kindness [should] lead you to repentance”). Paul sought transformation brought on by “the renewal of the mind” (Rom 12:2). The same point is reiterated in Ephesians 4:17-24; namely, that the person engaged in sexual offenses is self-deceived in his moral assessment of these acts and so needs to “learn Christ,” not only by “putting off” the old ways but also by renewing the mind:

<sup>17</sup>[N]o longer walk as the Gentiles walk, . . . <sup>19</sup>who . . . have given themselves up to sexual licentiousness (*aselgeia*) for the greedy doing of every *sexual impurity* (*akatharsia*). <sup>20</sup>But you did not so *learn Christ*, <sup>21</sup>if in fact you listened to him and were taught in him, in accordance with the fact that there is truth in Jesus. <sup>22</sup>[You were taught] to put off, as regards the former conduct, the old human that is being corrupted by *desires that deceive*, <sup>23</sup>and to *renew yourselves by the spirit of your mind* <sup>24</sup>and to clothe yourselves with the new human that was created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. . . . (emphases added)

The ACC and Covenant Network would apparently have the church do away with the renewal-of-the-mind side of repentance for officers of the church. This would be a tragedy of monumental proportions. A call for officers of the church to abstain from the sinful behavior that they are tempted to engage in but not to change their mind about the moral character of that behavior would be a call to superficial transformation that is unscriptural and unreformed, dangerous to the church, and dangerous for the perpetrator of the offense.

Believers are expected to conform not only their behavior but also their thoughts to God’s will as revealed in the teaching of Jesus and in the apostolic witness of Scripture. A person who continues to validate inner desires that Scripture declares to be at great odds with God’s will is unfit for church office, not merely because he occasionally “backslides” but because he suffers from an unreformed mind.

As apostle to the Gentiles, Paul was in the business of “taking every *thought* captive for obedience to Christ,” not just outward behavior (2 Cor 10:5). This is consistent with Jesus’ interiorizing of God’s ethical demand, for example, in his saying about adultery of the heart (Matt 5:27-30).

We pointed above to the case of the incestuous man in 1 Cor 5 as an instance where change was required of the heart/mind and not just the outward behavior. To extend the analogy to other sexual matters, would the ACC and the Covenant Network want to argue that the church’s call to repentance could not apply to pedosexual persons (pedophiles) who did not believe that sex with children was sinful; worse, that such a person could be ordained to office? One could continue *ad nauseum* with analogies outside the sphere of sexual behavior. Should the church ordain to office men who abstain from beating up their wives but who continue to believe that God wants them to engage in such behavior?

Should the church ordain persons who agree to abstain from extorting money from the poor while continuing to consider such extortion their divine right? Should it ordain persons who agree to abstain from racist actions but do not see such actions as wrong? These are the absurdities to which the rationale of the ACC and Covenant Network lead.

On major issues of belief and praxis the church rightly expects conformity not only of one's behavior but also of one's mind to God's will as declared in Scripture and embraced in the church's confessions.

*Conclusion*

**Since the ACC's recommendation to disapprove the Pittsburgh overture is based on multiple egregious errors and extraordinary ideological bias, commissioners should disregard its recommendation.**