

## PUP Task Force Report Distorts the Unity/Purity Message of Ephesians

By Robert A. J. Gagnon, Ph.D.

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**“Sexual impurity must not even be named among you....”**

The Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church has submitted to the 216<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (2004) a Preliminary Report of its work that seriously truncates the message of Ephesians as regards “purity.” In so doing, it distorts the message of Ephesians regarding “peace” and “unity” as well.

The Report is available on the web at:

<http://www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity/resources/prelimreport.pdf>. Readers will find the theological core of the Report in its Part B, “Preliminary Affirmations About the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church” (pp. 2-5). It builds its case almost exclusively on an exegesis of the Epistle to the Ephesians.

The Report quotes copiously from Ephesians, citing 1:3-4; 2:13-14, 16, 21-22; 3:18, 20; 4:2-3, 5-6, 13; 5:2, 10, 25-27; 6:15. It omits the warning regarding false teaching in 4:14-16 (we should not be “tossed to and fro . . . by every wind of teaching” but should rather “speak the truth in love”). Even more importantly, it omits virtually the entire opening section on moral transformation from 4:17 to 5:20 (36 verses).

The only exceptions are the mention of two short phrases. There are brief mentions of Christ’s self-giving “for us” in 5:2 and of “finding out what is pleasing to the Lord” in 5:10. The latter is cited to prove that we should view disputes as “gracious invitations to further work together.” This is precisely what the text does not say in context. Rather, in context, the text urges believers to be “determining what is pleasing to the Lord” based on the clarity of the church’s moral exhortation on sexual ethics and other areas.

What the Report unfortunately leaves out are the author’s stern warnings regarding continuance in “impure” patterns of behavior, particularly sexual behavior. Thus, for example:

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

Sexual immorality (*porneia*) and sexual impurity (*akatharsia*) of any kind . . . must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. . . . Know this indeed, that every sexually immoral person ( *pornos*) or sexually impure person ( *akathartos*) . . . has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no

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***Indeed, it must not even be spoken about.... It can risk a believer's disinheritance.... Believers should disassociate....***

***The term for "sexual impurity" [in Eph 4-5] is the same term used in Romans 1:24-27 to designate same-sex intercourse.***

***Unity and peace must always be centered on the lordship of Jesus Christ.***

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one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God is coming on the children of disobedience. So do not become associates of theirs. For you were once darkness, but now light in the Lord. Walk as children of light. . . . determining what is acceptable to the Lord. And do not be partnering with the unfruitful works of darkness but rather even be exposing/refuting them. For it is shameful even to speak of the things that are done in secret by them. (Eph 4:17-24; 5:3-12; my translation)

These exhortations make clear that the author—whom we shall hereafter refer to as “Paul,” though recognizing a scholarly dispute over authorship—believes that no unrepentant sexual impurity is to be tolerated indefinitely within the community of faith. Indeed, it must not even be spoken about, that is, in approving terms. Sexual impurity must rather be exposed and refuted. The text also makes clear that serial unrepentant, sexually impure behavior can risk a believer’s disinheritance from the kingdom of God, subjecting the professed believer to the same wrath of God that awaits unbelievers. It also goes so far as to say that believers should disassociate from fellow believers who persist unrepentantly in their sexually immoral behavior.

Now, in this context, it should not be overlooked that the term for “sexual impurity,” *akatharsia*, is the same term used in Paul’s letter to the Romans to designate all female-female and male-male sexual intercourse (1:24-27). Paul normally uses the term to denote sexually impure acts generally that are, or should be, obvious to all believers, including bestiality, same-sex intercourse, incest, adultery, and sex with prostitutes. The wording of Rom 1:24-27, in its literary and historical context, makes it evident that same-sex intercourse was at or near the top of the list of “sexually impure” acts for Paul—a supreme instance of human suppression of the truth about the way the Creator made us, a truth still evident in nature in the complementary structure and essence of maleness and femaleness. There can be no doubt that the warnings in Ephesians 4:17-24 and 5:3-12 certainly include professed believers who engage in serial, unrepentant acts of same-sex intercourse.

The Task Force’s assessment of Ephesians as regards peace, unity, and purity gives little hint of this. Instead, the Task Force Report makes a number of claims that do not accord with Paul’s remarks in Ephesians 4-5. For example:

- The Task Force Report tells us that it is “difficult to see how this goal of Christian purity can be squared with the equally important call to unity and peace.” Not true. It is easily squared inasmuch as unity and peace must always be centered on the lordship of Jesus Christ and the “learning of Christ” in accordance with the apostolic witness. There is no such thing as a unity based on toleration, and even approval, of sexual behavior that Jesus and the united witness of the authors of Scripture would have been appalled by. The Report insists that, as regards purity, unity, and peace, “no one [can be] elevated above the other two.” And yet, ultimately, the purity of the community does have priority over unity, certainly as regards core values in sexual ethics. More precisely, it defines true unity as a value contingent on adherence to apostolic teaching.

***The Report claims that “purity must not become a pretext for division.” Not true. Rather, unity must not become a pretext for impurity.***

***The Report claims that “all voices [must] be heard.” Not true. Ephesians 4-5 says the exact opposite.***

***The Report alleges [that believers can never disassociate from fellow believers.] Paul calls on believers to disassociate....***

***The Report claims that “Christians cannot even entertain the notion of severing...without placing themselves in jeopardy of being severed from Christ himself.” Not true [according to Ephesians 4-5].***

***The policy put forward in Ephesians 4-5 is exactly the policy implemented in the case of adult incest in 1 Corinthians 5.***

- The Task Force Report claims that “purity must not become a pretext for division.” Not true, at least not as regards an other-sex prerequisite for sexual unions. Rather, unity must not become a pretext for impurity. Paul is quite clear in Ephesians 4-5 that serial unrepentant sexual immorality of an egregious sort is just cause for disassociation.
- The Task Force Report alleges that “unity cannot be attained if the voices of some members of the body are ignored” and that “all voices [must] be heard and respected.” Not true. Ephesians 4-5 says the exact opposite. The church must not allow acts defined as sexually immoral by the united apostolic witness to be spoken about in an approving manner at any time in the body of Christ.
- The Task Force Report further alleges: “It is a necessity: union with Christ means union with all the other members of Christ’s body, including those with whom one would not ordinarily choose to associate.” To their “necessity” Paul would say “Not necessarily.” Paul rather calls on believers to disassociate, at least at some point, from fellow professed believers who refuse to desist from acts that the apostolic witness deems to be sexually impure. Paul treats this as a last-ditch measure on the part of the community to bring offenders to their senses and so, hopefully, to reclaim them for the kingdom of God.
- The Task Force also claims that “Christians cannot even entertain the notion of severing their ties with sisters and brothers in Christ without also placing themselves in severe jeopardy of being severed from Christ himself.” Not true. The implication of Ephesians 4-5 is rather that the church should consider disassociating itself not just from believers who persist in sexually immoral behavior but also from believers who condone and support such behavior. Paul is quite clear that believers who persist in sexually immoral behavior are the ones that run that risk of being excluded from God’s kingdom, not those who disassociate from such persons. In fact, Paul labels “deceitful” all claims that such persons are not really at risk. Those who support and condone sexually immoral behavior may become accomplices in a fellow brother’s or sister’s possible exclusion from God’s kingdom.

The policy put forward in Ephesians 4-5 is exactly the policy implemented by Paul in the case of adult incest between a man and his stepmother discussed in 1 Corinthians 5. Paul wasn’t interested in whether the case of incest was a committed relationship of love. He insisted that the community at Corinth disassociate from the incestuous man if the latter refused to repent. Paul did not call here for a unity that trumped issues of sexual purity. He did not insist that “all the voices” be heard. He did not say that to disassociate from the incestuous man would sever them from Christ. He did not puzzle over how to relate questions of unity to questions of purity. To the contrary on all these points.

Paul was firm and unequivocal, and eminently pastoral, in insisting on temporary disfellowship, inasmuch as the incestuous believer’s eternal destiny was at stake. That the professed believer’s destiny was at stake is clear enough from the vice list in 6:9-10 (paralleling those in 5:10-11), which correlates, in context, incest with serial unrepentant adultery, same-sex intercourse, and sex with prostitutes as sexual behaviors that could get professed believers excluded from God’s kingdom. There is no doubt that Paul would

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have followed the same course of action for a case of adult and consensual male-male intercourse, whether in the context of a committed relationship or not, that he would have followed for a case of adult and consensual incest, committed or not.

In our first extant Pauline letter, 1 Thessalonians, Paul makes clear that one of the first things that he did with new Gentile converts to the faith was to sit them down and tell them what the “commands of God” and “will of God” were in the area of sexual morality (4:1-8, the beginning of the moral exhortation in 1 Thessalonians). Gentiles were welcome into the household of faith but not to engage any longer in the types of sexual behavior that typified Gentile life and at odds with Scripture. Those who did otherwise, those who engaged in “sexual impurity” (*akatharsia*, 4:7), were not just rejecting Paul. They were “rejecting God.” And God would be “an avenger concerning all these things,” especially since sexual immorality was a holistic offense against the human body indwelt by the Holy Spirit (compare 1 Thess 4:8 with 1 Cor 6:18-20).

Contrary to what the Task Force Report suggests, there can be no unity of the church that insists that advocates of homosexual practice be allowed to promote their views indefinitely and officially, much less that committed homosexual relationships should be blessed by any sectors of the church. At least that is what Paul tells us.

Finally, in all its severe injunctions about the essential value of unity, the Task Force Report ignores the glaring fact that the PCUSA is a denomination. As such, it does not share the same corporate institutional structure with, say, Methodists, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Baptists, Pentecostals, Catholics, and others. If we are not violating Ephesians by remaining in the PCUSA, a denominational entity that is structurally separate from other denominations, how can an “amicable institutional separation” of very different elements within the PCUSA be a violation of Ephesians’ message on unity?

And shouldn’t it be recognized that most people in the PCUSA have for years felt a greater theological kinship with many persons across denominational lines than with many persons within the PCUSA? The PCUSA is already in de facto disunity and has been so for decades or more.

In drastically truncating Ephesians’ message about purity, the Preliminary Report of the Task Force deserves to be significantly altered before acceptance by the General Assembly. Failing that, it should be rejected.

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