

NOTICE: This opinion is subject to modification resulting from motions for reconsideration under Supreme Court Rule 27, the Court’s reconsideration, and editorial revisions by the Reporter of Decisions. The version of the opinion published in the Advance Sheets for the Georgia Reports, designated as the “Final Copy,” will replace any prior version on the Court’s website and docket. A bound volume of the Georgia Reports will contain the final and official text of the opinion.

In the
Supreme Court of Georgia

No. S26Y1490

In the Matter of William Taylor Payne

Decided: October 14, 2026

PER CURIAM.

This disciplinary matter is before the Court on the report and recommendation of Special Master Robert E. Wilson, filed pursuant to Bar Rule 4-106(e). In the report, the Special Master recommends that the Court disbar Respondent William Taylor Payne (State Bar No. 568275), who has been a member of the State Bar since 1977, for his violations of Rules 8.4(a)(2)¹ and 9.1(a)(2)² of the Georgia Rules of Professional Conduct (“Rules”), found in Bar Rule 4-102(d). Neither Payne nor the State Bar has sought review by the Review Board or filed exceptions to the Special Master’s report, so the matter is now ripe for this Court’s review. After our review of the record, we agree that disbarment is the appropriate sanction for Payne’s violations of the Rules.

¹ Rule 8.4(a)(2) provides that “[i]t shall be a violation of the [GRPC] for a lawyer to ... be convicted of a felony.” The maximum penalty for a violation of Rule 8.4(a)(2) is disbarment.

² Rule 9.1(a)(2) provides, in pertinent part, that “[m]embers of the State Bar of Georgia shall, within sixty days, notify the State Bar of Georgia of[] ... being convicted of any felony or of a misdemeanor involving moral turpitude where the underlying conduct relates to the lawyer’s fitness to practice law.” The maximum penalty for a violation of Rule 9.1(a)(2) is a public reprimand.

The record reflects that, on September 2, 2025, Payne entered a guilty plea pursuant to *North Carolina v. Alford*, 400 US 25 (1970), to one felony count of violating the Georgia Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act, OCGA § 16-14-4(c).³ See *State of Ga. v. William T. Payne*, No. 20CR2508 (DeKalb County Sup. Ct.). This count alleged that between January 1, 2015, and August 13, 2015, Payne and three others knowingly used stolen data from the Georgia Electronic Accident Reporting System—which was property of the DeKalb County Police Department and had a value greater than \$170,000—to obtain personal injury clients and money. Following Payne’s guilty plea, the State Bar initiated disciplinary proceedings under Bar Rule 4-106 (establishing a shortened timeframe for disciplinary proceedings based on an attorney’s conviction of a crime) and charged Payne with violating Rule 8.4(a)(2) by pleading guilty to a felony and Rule 9.1(a)(2) by failing to notify the State Bar of his conviction. This Court appointed a Special Master, see S26B1004 (Apr. 6, 2026), and on April 21, 2026, Payne acknowledged service of the petition and the order of appointment of the Special Master.

The Special Master held a hearing on the petition. At the

³ OCGA § 16-14-4 provides the following:

It shall be unlawful for any person to conspire or endeavor to violate any of the provisions of subsection (a) or (b) of this Code section. A person violates this subsection when:

He or she together with one or more persons conspires to violate any of the provisions of subsection (a) or (b) of this Code section and any one or more of such persons commits any overt act to effect the object of the conspiracy; or

He or she endeavors to violate any of the provisions of subsection (a) or (b) of this Code section and commits any overt act to effect the object of the endeavor.

hearing, the State Bar submitted a certified copy of the conviction, a certified copy of the indictment, and the plea colloquy. Payne gave an unsworn statement at the hearing, asserting that he was not involved in the conspiracy on which the conviction was based, but explaining that he pleaded guilty because “going before a jury ... could be precarious.” The Special Master also noted that, after the deadline for post-hearing submissions, he received a document from Payne in which Payne expressed regret for his “lapse in ethical behavior” and indicated that he was “fully prepared to accept whatever disposition the Court deems meet and just.”

The Special Master then issued his report and recommendation, relaying the above facts and noting that Payne’s “conduct had a direct and significant connection to his practice of law ... and to his relationships with his clients.” As for the Rules violated, the Special Master agreed that Payne violated Rules 8.4(a)(2) and 9.1(a)(2). The Special Master then considered the framework set out in the *ABA Standards for Imposing Lawyer Sanctions* (1992) (“ABA Standards”).⁴ The Special Master determined that Payne violated his duty owed as a professional; that his violation of Rule 8.4(a)(2) was intentional and that his violation of Rule 9.1(a)(2) was knowing; and that Payne’s conviction caused serious injury to the DeKalb County Police Department, the public, and the legal profession and that Payne’s failure to report his conviction caused potential serious injuries to the public and legal system. Regarding aggravating factors, the Special Master determined that Payne acted with a dishonest and selfish motive by paying co-conspirators to obtain clients and client leads

⁴ See ABA Standard 3.0 (when imposing a sanction, “a court should consider the following factors: (a) the duty violated; (b) the lawyer’s mental state; (c) the potential or actual injury caused by the lawyer’s misconduct; and (d) the existence of aggravating or mitigating factors”).

while using data that Payne knew was stolen, then using those clients to obtain money through the settlement of personal injury lawsuits. See ABA Standard 9.22(b). The Special Master also determined that, until his post-hearing submission, Payne had not clearly accepted responsibility for his illegal conduct or expressed remorse, other than regret for suffering the consequences of his plea, and thus had refused to acknowledge the wrongful nature of his conduct.⁵ See ABA Standard 9.22(g). As for mitigation, the Special Master determined that the only applicable factor was a lack of disciplinary history, see ABA Standard 9.32(a), but noted Payne’s self-reported contributions to his church and his respectful demeanor during the disciplinary proceeding. Regardless, the

⁵ We have previously cautioned “Special Masters and the State Disciplinary Review Board against overreading an attorney’s refusal to admit guilt from the outset.” *In the Matter of Taylor*, 323 Ga. 214, 235 (2025). As we noted above, Payne’s guilty plea was entered pursuant to *Alford*, which authorizes a defendant to plead guilty while nevertheless maintaining his innocence when he has made a conscious decision that entering a plea is in his best interests. 400 US at 37–38. A guilty plea entered on an *Alford* theory thus is quite different from an unconditional guilty plea. See *United States v. Broce*, 488 US 563, 570 (1989) (“By entering a plea of guilty, the accused is not simply stating that he did the discrete acts described in the indictment; he is admitting guilt of a substantive crime.”). And in the context of disciplinary proceedings following an attorney’s criminal conviction pursuant to an *Alford* guilty plea, we have recognized that “an attorney’s refusal to acknowledge the wrongful nature of his or her behavior should not automatically be considered a factor in aggravation of punishment, particularly in the face of an honest and objectively reasonable belief in one’s own innocence.” *In re Suttle*, 288 Ga. 14, 16 (2010). Indeed, “attorneys in disciplinary proceedings have the right, like all litigants, to advance good-faith, colorable arguments supporting their position,” and “refusing to admit guilt from the outset generally means the mitigating effect of showing remorse—one factor among many—is absent, not that the aggravating effect of refusing to acknowledge the wrongful nature of one’s conduct is present.” *In the Matter of Ferguson*, 324 Ga. 222, 227 n.4 (2025) (cleaned up).

Special Master explained that the aggravating factors substantially outweigh the limited mitigating factors and that the appropriate penalty in this matter is disbarment. See *In the Matter of Norton*, 315 Ga. 484, 490 (2023) (upholding special master’s recommendation of disbarment where lawyer pleaded guilty to financial crimes conspiracy and failed to report the conviction as required by Rule 9.1).

Having reviewed the record, we agree with the Special Master’s recommendation of disbarment. This resolution is consistent with prior similar cases. See, e.g., *Norton*, 315 Ga. at 490; *In the Matter of Fry*, 302 Ga. 370 (2017) (disbarring an attorney, despite the parties consenting to a one-year suspension, for violating Rule 8.4(a)(2) where the attorney pleaded guilty to a felony pursuant to *Alford*); *In the Matter of Hardwick*, 315 Ga. 840, 840 (2023) (accepting voluntary surrender of license, which is tantamount to disbarment, for attorney’s violation of Rule 8.4(a)(2) where attorney was convicted of “numerous felonies involving financial fraud”); *In the Matter of Rachel*, 304 Ga. 826 (2018) (disbarring attorney for violation of Rule 8.4(a)(2) where attorney was convicted of one count of conspiracy and 12 counts of money laundering). Accordingly, it is hereby ordered that the name of William Taylor Payne be removed from the rolls of persons authorized to practice law in the State of Georgia. Payne is reminded of his duties pursuant to Bar Rule 4-219(b).

Disbarred. All the Justices concur.