What Kind of Unity?
Reflections on how affirming Same Sex relationships could affect our unity as Presbyterians in Christ
by Paul Johnston

We will continue to hold different, even opposite, opinions. The real question for us is whether we can offer those differing opinions to God, respect one another as each seeking to be faithful to Christ, and continue to be a community of disciples together in The Presbyterian Church in Canada. (Body, Mind, and Soul p.36)

On the issues of human sexuality and sexual orientation, there is no question that diverse and even conflicting perspectives are present in The Presbyterian Church in Canada. The real question that remains is whether we can maintain unity in the midst of our diversity or not. (BMS p.50)

Before we can seek an answer to “the real question that remains,” we probably need a better understanding of just what kind of unity we’re trying to maintain. The unity of the church in the world is the answer to Christ’s prayer “on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” John 17:20-21 (NRSV)

In the world today, we see that prayer answered in different ways in different situations.

Imagine a hypothetical Knox Presbyterian Church in Thistown. They have ongoing partnership ministries with the St. Patrick’s Roman Catholic Church on the other side of Thistown, and with the St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church in Thattown. Those partnerships are both expressions of their unity in the Body of Christ, but that unity looks different in the different situations.

On Sunday morning, the upbeat, praise-band led worship at Knox is different from the reverent, traditional worship at St. Andrew’s and St. Patrick’s – though it does look a little like the Saturday evening “family praise” mass at St. Patrick’s. Behind those visible differences in worship practice, though, Knox and St. Andrew’s share a close relationship as members of the same denominational family. And because those surface differences are not the only things that distinguish Knox and St. Patrick’s, they recognize each other as members of different denominational families.

There are profound things all three congregations hold in common. They share a common confession of Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. They embrace the expression of that common faith in the “ecumenical creeds” adopted in the early centuries of the church, the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds, and in the decisions of the early church councils describing the nature of their Trinitarian faith and the broad outlines of the gospel preached by the apostles. St. Patrick’s may call the other two congregations “separated brethren,” but all three see each other as members together of Christ’s family. Their partnerships are ecumenical, not inter-faith, relationships.

What allows an observer to recognize Knox and St. Andrew’s as members of the same denomination, and Knox and St. Patrick’s as members of different denominations? In their worship practices, Knox is both the same as and different from both St. Andrew’s and St.
Patrick’s. But Knox and St. Andrew’s share some things tie them in a closer relationship than either of them share with St. Patrick’s.

It wouldn’t take too long to recognize a difference in leadership. As Presbyterian congregations, Knox and St. Andrew’s are led by a Session that includes ruling elders selected in congregational votes, in Presbyterian tradition described as “the voice of God speaking through the people of God.” One of the important qualities that legitimizes an office holder in the Presbyterian tradition is what John Calvin called “the consent and approbation of the people.” To be considered for election, as the Book of Forms puts it, a person “must be a professing member of the congregation and must be ‘an example to the believers in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity’ (1 Timothy 4:12).”

A ruling elder in the Knox congregation who moved and became a professing member at St. Andrew’s would be recognized as a presbyter. That particular ruling elder might not have the gifts necessary for election to active service on the St. Andrew’s Session, but that elder would be entitled to equal consideration among all other candidates for a vacancy on that Session.

Should a ministerial vacancy occur at St. Andrew’s, any person serving as a teaching elder at Knox would be entitled to be considered for the position at St. Andrew’s. There may be any number of prudential reasons why moving from Knox to St. Andrew’s would not be wise, but in principle there’s no reason why a minister at Knox couldn’t serve as the minister at St. Andrew’s.

In short, congregations in the Presbyterian denomination recognize each others’ ordinations of church officers, and presbyters in one congregation are easily recognized as presbyters in the others.

Presbyters considering a move from Knox to St. Patrick’s face a completely different situation. No matter how good the “fit” between the Knox minister and the St. Patrick’s needs, a married man or a married or single woman who could easily serve as a teaching elder at Knox would in principle be ineligible for consideration for pastoral service at St. Patrick’s. As a matter of conviction, the Roman Catholic Church limits ordination to celibate men, a rather narrower standard than that of the Presbyterian Church. The ordination of a woman or married man will not be recognized by the Roman Catholic Church.

Presbyterians and Roman Catholics share a heritage of faith built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, and acknowledge the writings of those apostles and prophets found in the Bible to be authoritative sources of religious instruction. How do they come to such different conclusions about ordination?

The Bible does offer hints and suggestions that celibate people are good candidates for church leadership. There is the example of Jesus and Paul, who never married and whose ministries show the advantage of being able to serve free of earthly obligations. The Apostle Paul observes, “The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord.” 1 Corinthians 7:32 (NRSV) Still, this is far from a command that only unmarried men can serve the Lord.
The requirement for priestly celibacy grows out of the experience of the church in the first millennium. From the fifth and sixth centuries, a growing consensus saw unmarried men as the best candidates for church leadership because of the way they could focus on the affairs of the Lord. To this day, many Roman Catholics find inspiration in the example of a man who has visibly given up the comforts of hearth and home, and the joyful heritage of children and grandchildren, in order to be a caring father for Christ’s children. Over the years, the preference for single male priests eventually evolved into the view that unmarried men were not only the best candidates but were the only fit candidates for church leadership. The idea was confirmed as official church teaching and policy at the first Lateran Councils in the 12th century.

A thousand years later, Roman Catholics still follow the requirement of priestly celibacy (with a few qualifications), not because the Bible makes it a requirement, but because the church teaching makes it a requirement. The heritage of church teaching decides the question because Roman Catholic theology teaches, while individual teachers may get things wrong from time to time, the Holy Spirit protects the church as a whole from falling into error. The Bible is authoritative in Roman Catholic theology, but doctrine comes from the Bible interpreted by the *magisterium*, by the teaching authority of the church. Contemporary Roman Catholics who defend this church tradition see it as a gift of God that lets the church speak clearly and decisively about contemporary issues without descending into the cacophony of duelling scholars that confuses the protestant witness. They appreciate how this makes their theology a living, growing body of truth, able to witness to new circumstances, able to answer questions that could not have been imagined in the previous millennium.

This theory of how God’s will is known is quite different from that employed by Protestants generally and Presbyterians in particular. When Martin Luther said at the Diet of Worms he could “believe neither pope nor councils” because “they have erred repeatedly and contradicted themselves,” he offered a direct challenge to this way of knowing God’s will. His basis for knowing God’s will was “the testimony of the Holy Scriptures” and what could be reasonably deduced from them. Following this example, the Presbyterian/Reformed tradition that gave birth to Knox Church in Thistown and St. Andrew’s in Thattown has realized individual teachers can err, and the church as a whole can err. The only completely trustworthy way to know Christ’s will is the scriptures. Hence, the Latin catchphrase *sola scriptura*, scripture alone is trustworthy.

The example of the Jerusalem council in Acts 15 shows this principle does not eliminate other sources of information in seeking God’s will, but it gives them only subordinate influence. The council gathered because of a dispute in the young church about whether Gentile believers needed to be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses.

After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us.” *Acts 15:7-9 (RSV)*
Then “The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles.” Acts 15:12 (NRSV) The stories of their experience opened the possibility for welcoming the Gentiles as Gentiles, without requiring them to become Jews first. However, the decision to embrace that possibility was not made on the basis of experience but of scriptural witness. As the Apostle James described their decision:

This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written,  
“After this I will return,  
and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen;  
from its ruins I will rebuild it,  
and I will set it up,  
so that all other peoples may seek the Lord—  
even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called.  
Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things known from long ago.” Acts 15:15-18 (NRSV)

Experience alone was not enough to change church teaching, even the experience of an eminent and respected person like Peter. There needed to be a word from the scriptures endorsing the change.

The disciples felt free to ignore the dietary requirements of the old Law because they could point to a saying of Jesus: “Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?” And the Gospel of Mark comments, “(Thus he declared all foods clean.)” Mark 7:18-19 (NRSV) They could welcome the Gentiles as brothers and sisters of Jesus because of prophetic promises for grace offered “to all the nations who are called by my name.” Amos 9:12 (NRSV) This is the early church model for having the Bible as, to borrow the words from Living Faith, “the standard of all doctrine by which we must test any word that comes to us from church, world, or inner experience. We subject to its judgement all we believe and do.” When changing circumstances seem to call for a change in church teaching, the Presbyterian tradition asks as James did, “Does this agree with the words written by the prophets?”

Should celibacy be a requirement for church leaders? It’s difficult for the folk at Knox or St. Patrick’s to discuss this much further than describing their differing positions. Evidence which is decisive for St. Patrick’s is much less important to the folk at Knox. Where protestants would say with Luther “persuade me from the scripture,” the Roman Catholics would respond “the Spirit has already clearly spoken through our church council.” They really don’t have a common basis from which to find a point of agreement. The best they can do is charitably offer support to each other as they follow the gospel with integrity.

This does not mean one group is Christian while the other is not. But this deep disagreement about how Christ’s will is known makes them distinct kinds of Christian. They are united in their confession of Christ, but divided in how Christ is known. And this becomes another way in which Knox and St. Andrew’s are members of the same denomination, while Knox and St. Patrick’s are members of distinct denominations. United in Christ, they can, to borrow the
words of Body, Mind and Soul, “offer those differing opinions to God, respect one another as each seeking to be faithful to Christ, and continue to be a community of disciples together,” but the differences are profound enough that they do this as disciples in different denominations.

For their differences in worship style, and probably dozens of other choices to adapt to unique situations, Knox and St. Andrew’s still share a common foundation in knowing Christ’s will. Through its history, the Presbyterian Church has taught faithful sexual activity happened in the context of a marriage where a man left his family and was united to his wife in a family relationship they recognized as being created by God bringing them together.

But what if St. Andrew’s were to embrace the idea that marriage and sexuality was instead a matter of two adults confessing their commitment and devotion to one another as an expression of their love for each other and for Jesus Christ? This would lead them to recognize as holy in God’s sight a range of sexual practices wider than that recognized at Knox. How should this impact the relationship between Knox and St. Andrew’s? Their different choices about worship styles did not overcome their denominational similarity. Is this choice on the same level as those choices? Or does it represent something deeper?

We can begin answering that question by exploring how a congregation like St. Andrew’s might come to a new insight about sexuality. The tradition from which Knox and St. Andrew’s grew is clear about the source for knowing God’s will for God’s people: “The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as the written Word of God, testifying to Christ the living Word, are the canon of all doctrine, by which Christ rules our faith and life.” To describe what that “canon of all doctrine” teaches, the Presbyterian Church uses confessions which serve as “subordinate standards” under scripture. That confessional tradition clearly understood sexuality according to the pattern that the creator made humans as male and female, and sexual activity was only permissible in a marriage where a man had left his family and was united to his wife.

The Presbyterian Church’s confessional tradition is clear the church saw — and sees — sexual activity is only legitimate in the marriage of a man and a woman. The Presbyterian Church recognizes this in its historic confessional standard, the Westminster Confession: “Marriage is to be between one man and one woman: neither is it lawful for any man to have more than one wife, nor for any woman to have more than one husband, at the same time.” (Ch. 24, par. 1) It recognizes this in its contemporary confession, Living Faith: “Christian marriage is a union in Christ whereby a man and a woman become one in the sight of God.” (8.2.3) Numerous General Assembly decisions have affirmed this standard.

The church has changed its mind about what the Bible teaches before. The Presbyterian Church in Canada has changed its mind about musical instruments in worship. It has changed its mind about women being eligible for church leadership. But in both cases, those new positions emerged out of a fresh study of what the Bible says about the subject. People could say the results of those new studies “agreed with the words of the Prophets.” Verses like Psalm 150 opened people’s minds to the possibility of instrumental praise; “Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp! Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe! Praise him with clanging cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals!”
Psalm 150:3-5 (NRSV) Biblical affirmations of women like Phoebe and Priscilla (Romans 15:1-4) provoked a fresh engagement with the message of the Bible.

Is there a word of the prophets declaring same sex marriages holy in Christ’s sight? While earlier changes in doctrine came out of discussion that considered how to weigh different Bible passages against each other, the Bible speaks with one voice on issues of sexuality. As Auburn Theological Seminary professor Walter Wink told the Presbyterian Church (USA) General Assembly in the midst of their debates about this, “Where the Bible mentions homosexual behaviour at all, it clearly condemns it. I freely grant all that.” He goes on to declare, “The issue is precisely whether that Biblical judgement is correct.” For Dr. Wink, and for other Christian teachers in the European and North American “mainline” tradition, that judgement is not correct. Christ calls us to bless sexual practice in more contexts than heterosexual marriage. On what basis can a person decide the biblical judgement is incorrect?

A Roman Catholic scholar who shares this opinion of sexual ethics is Luke Timothy Johnson. When it comes to developing an ethic of sexuality, he writes, “The task demands intellectual honesty. I have little patience with efforts to make Scripture say something other than what it says, through appeals to linguistic or cultural subtleties. The exegetical situation is straightforward: we know what the text says. But what are we to do with what the text says?” He begins to answer the question this way: “I think it important to state clearly that we do, in fact, reject the straightforward commands of Scripture, and appeal instead to another authority when we declare that same-sex unions can be holy and good. And what exactly is that authority? We appeal explicitly to the weight of our own experience and the experience thousands of others have witnessed to, which tells us that to claim our own sexual orientation is in fact to accept the way in which God has created us.”

Perhaps the people at St. Andrew’s saw in the Bible hints of an acceptance of same sex attraction as part of God’s good creation. Perhaps they noted an ethical trajectory trending in the direction of this kind of affirmation. But making this acceptance and affirmation part of what Jesus calls the church to teach in this generation depends on a word beyond the Bible. Those who have claimed this as Christ’s teaching for this generation have testified to an assurance the Holy Spirit guides us in our experience of grace into a knowledge of God’s truth. While from time to time we may make mistakes, when we are faithfully and courageously submitted to the Spirit guidance, on the whole we will get it right. While this may be new for Presbyterians, other streams within the Christian tradition have embraced this sense of ongoing revelation by the Spirit. They have seen it as a helpful way to keep the church’s proclamation living and growing, allowing it to adapt so it can offer a gracious word to new situations and new needs.

This may be one of the parts of the Christian tradition through history, but it is different from the historic Presbyterian/Reformed tradition in which Knox Presbyterian Church stands. In its own way, this difference in how to know Christ’s will between Knox and St. Andrew’s is as large as the difference between Knox and St. Patrick’s. These differences in religious epistemology make it difficult for Knox and St. Patrick’s to discuss whether clerical celibacy should be a standard for church office. They can be content to acknowledge their differences, affirm each other as brethren in Christ, and work together in as many ways as they can – respecting their different convictions.
In a similar way, what now distinguishes Knox and St. Andrew’s is not the choice to affirm same sex relationships as a moral possibility. What distinguishes them is a different understanding of how to find what Christ’s will for the church is. These differences in religious epistemology make it difficult for Knox and St. Andrew’s to discuss whether being in a same sex relationship disqualifies a person for church office. The people at Knox may ask, “we no longer follow the dietary laws because Jesus declared all foods clean. Where did Jesus declare same sex relationships blessed?” Folk at St. Andrew’s might answer “Jesus declared it to us when we experienced his blessing as we witnessed the love they have for each other.”

That may decide the question for St. Andrew’s; it’s rather less decisive at Knox. What common basis do they have to find a point of agreement? How does the conversation move beyond simply presenting their different opinions with honesty and charity? The best they can do is charitably offer support to each other as they follow the gospel with integrity.

Is this really that big an issue? Even the term “religious epistemology” sounds like rarefied philosophical speculation. Can’t the debate be left among the academics at the theological colleges? Is it wise to let something so theoretical divide congregations? Does it make any real difference in congregational life? But theoretical understandings have practical results.

For example, regarding same sex unions as holy in Christ’s sight, St. Andrew’s would see no reason not to ordain an otherwise-qualified person in such a relationship as a ruling elder. Admitting that person to active service on the session would be as routine as admitting any other presbyter to that service.

But what if that presbyter moved to Knox? Knox still holds to the historic understanding of sexuality. Since, in their view, people in same sex relationships are committing fornication and are ineligible for ordination, much less election to active service. Regardless of their skills or gifts, they are in principle ineligible for election to any vacancy on the Session. The ordination St. Andrew’s performed to set these people apart as ruling elders would not be recognized at Knox, any more than Knox’s ordination of a married couple would be recognized by St. Patrick’s. There is no question Knox and St. Andrew’s remain partners in Christ’s mission. But is that partnership a denominational partnership, or an ecumenical partnership?

They have different ways of understanding how Christ’s will is known. Ordinations performed in one congregation are not automatically recognized in the other. The things that distinguish Knox Presbyterian from St. Patrick’s Roman Catholic also distinguish Knox from an LGBTQ-affirming St. Andrew’s. Those seem to be the parameters for the unity they can peacefully seek and both be free to follow their sincere convictions about Christ’s will.

In Body, Mind, and Soul, the Rev. Emily K. Bisset asked, “The real question that remains is whether we can maintain unity?” The answer seems to be a qualified yes. We can be united, recognizing one another as members of the family of Jesus Christ. But trying to follow Christ in the same denominational family with such deep division about how to hear Christ’s call puts a serious strain on the ties of unity – a strain perhaps even to the breaking point.
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