

# **Response of the Session of St. Andrew's, Huntsville, Ontario, to the Special Committee of Past Moderators on the Question of Unity and Diversity**

January 9, 2018

## **I. Thanks to the Committee**

As we respond as a Session to the paper "On the Question of Unity and Diversity," we first want to thank the Church Doctrine Committee for their diligent work on bringing this to our Church. We appreciate their laying out clear distinctions concerning the issues of unity pertaining to the Church universal, our denomination The Presbyterian Church in Canada, and the local Church. We also appreciate their focus on Calvin as a churchman who worked very hard for unity among the various churches of his time.

## **II. Calvin's concern for unity did not undermine his concern for the Truth of the Gospel**

We believe, however, that a close reading of Calvin shows that while indeed he loved the Church and its unity, as expressed at the time in its local variations, he never would have chosen unity over the truth of the Gospel being expressed.<sup>i</sup> We believe that this is what we would be asked to do in any compromise within our Church. Calvin's wonderful chapter on Church unity in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is immediately followed by a chapter on the marks of the false church and shows separation as equally important, when necessary. He writes:

**"The Communion of the Church was not established on the condition that it should serve as to snare us in idolatry, ungodliness, ignorance of God and other sort of evils, but rather to hold us in the fear of God and obedience to truth."**<sup>ii</sup>

In a word, Calvin loved the unity of God's Church, but not at the expense of proclaiming the transformational Gospel of Jesus Christ. As Donald Bloesch reminds us:

**"Jaroslav Pelikan has rightly called the Reformation a 'tragic necessity'. It was a tragic necessity because the church's witness to the Gospel was being compromised...It was tragic because it tore the church apart and subverted the common witness of the people of God."**<sup>iii</sup>

## **III. Our concern is for scriptural unity of the Church around God's Word**

In this spirit, as elders, we love and pray for the unity of God's Church. We take our call, as set out in our ordination vows, very seriously. We work everyday with those outside of our denomination, even those who may disagree with us. And, we work tirelessly with those inside our denomination, again to promote the unity of Christ's Church as much as we can. However, institutional unity cannot be a goal in and of itself.

### **a. John 17 – Unity is found in the sanctifying work of Christ, in obedience to His Word**

Turning to the Scriptures, we understand that Jesus desires and prays for the unity of His Universal Church in **John 17:20-23**, as expressed in our communities of faith – the Visible Church (including the Presbyterian Church in Canada). But, Jesus does not pray for this unity apart from the obedience to God’s Word in Christ that sanctifies us (**John 17:17**). So much of **John 15-17** is about abiding in Christ and about obeying His word (never mind the epistle of first John). This certainly includes loving our neighbour, but just as important is encouraging one another to leave our sin behind that deceives and ensnares us. We are constrained by this Word to assert that such holiness cannot be ignored in our talk about unity.

#### **b. Ephesians 4 – Unity is found as we mature in Christ, which includes holiness of life**

Later in the New Testament, Paul talks passionately about the unity of the Universal Church in **Ephesians 4:1-6**. He goes on to talk about the special responsibility of those called to teach in a way that promotes the unity and health of the Church (**Ephesians 4:7-14**). This plea for unity *and maturity* among the universal and local body of believers is a call that we take very seriously as ruling and teaching elders. But, we recognise that Paul then takes a turn (as Calvin and others do) in the passage that immediately follows:

**“Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching....Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become, in every respect, the *mature* body of Him who is the head..... So I tell you this and insist on it in the Lord, that you no longer live as the gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking.....**

**That....is not the way of life you learned when you heard about Christ and were taught in Him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”**  
**Ephesians 4:14-24**

It is to these same Ephesian elders that Paul brings a warning of their responsibility to guard the Church (**Acts 20:28-31**). We again are brought to the inseparable bond between the unity of the Church and the holiness of the Church. The summary by G.C. Berkouwer remains very timely. <sup>iv</sup>

#### **IV. The ‘Tragic Necessity of Essential Things’**

Thus, we regret to say we have concluded that we now have reached yet another crossroads of “tragic necessity”. We hold firmly to the belief that any compromise in our Church on the issue of ordaining and marrying LGBTQI people falls into the category, not of *adiaphora* (things non-essential for salvation), but of things that truly are essential.

Drawing on what we have sent to Assembly before: Our understanding of human sexuality is based on God creating men and women in the image of God, and is an essential doctrine from which flows our understanding of sin and therefore of salvation. <sup>v</sup>

We do not understand this controversial issue on sexuality as being equal to the dietary divisions that plagued the early Church. <sup>vi</sup> We also do not understand Jesus' silence on this matter as an open door to change our doctrine; rather Jesus lived in a Hebraic culture where the Torah was determinative on the actions of the community. <sup>vii</sup> We feel constrained by the Word of God to maintain that parts of our Church are muddying the waters so much that the transforming message of the Gospel in Christ cannot be clearly heard. We believe, based on scripture, that those in our Church who advocate for full inclusion of LGBTQ1 persons are compromising our understanding of human nature and sin, and therefore of the Gospel of God's grace. In our mind this a clear departure from the scriptural call to be transformed into the image of Christ. To cite briefly from our earlier response:

**"We appreciate the importance of listening to each other, of bearing with one another and of openness (being welcoming and loving) to those of different sexual preferences. At the same time, we believe that the Scriptural norm for marriage centres upon the enduring character of the male-female relationship. Pastorally speaking, we further believe that this is the message that we are constrained by the Word of God to share, even with friends or family who have chosen another way."** <sup>viii</sup>

#### **V. Living Faith calls Discipline as much a 'Mark' of the Church as is Unity**

In our Reformed Tradition, we talk about discipline as being a mark of the Church. We recognize that this has come to us not through Calvin, but through Martin Bucer and the Scottish Kirk. We believe that this means being set apart for Christ's purposes and His Mission in the world, but it also means being renewed and transformed from the sins that so easily entangle us. Donald Bloesch has very relevant words of warning on this:

**"The true church is a church of sinners, as antinomians never tire of reminding us, but it is also a church of the righteous, that is, of those who strive for righteousness. We must uphold both the message of free grace that goes out to all and the demands of costly grace, which are designed to keep us on the narrow road to salvation."** <sup>ix</sup>

#### **VI. Living with Integrity under the Word of God, may lead us to separate Confessions**

We indeed want to confess our faith in love. Yet we are constrained not to compromise the truth of God's Word (as we understand it) for feelings of love toward our neighbour. Both truth and love are essential elements of our proclamation. *And, indeed we do appreciate the fact that this same constraint is on those who believe very differently than we do, and would advocate for full inclusion.* In this moment of 'tragic necessity' we believe that boldness and integrity needs to be maintained for the sake of all. In obedience to the scriptures, we believe that two non-geographical houses would have to be set up within our church with complete compartmentalization, (meaning no travelling back and forth of members, elders and ministers) before we could see some type of "Institutional unity." But, this begs the question, if we have to be this divided to be united - where would any true unity be?

We are brought to the same conclusion as the paper, that our Presbyterian Church is at

an impasse and that there will be no way forward that does not involve pain for all. At the same time, as elders in St. Andrew's Huntsville, we find that we can stand in no other place than what we currently do. In talking about confessing our faith under the constraint of the authority of the Word of God, we quote Karl Barth's wisdom at length.

**“This parallelism and contradiction (of confession), is of course, that of a mutually asserted exclusiveness. By their utterly opposed contradictory definitions of the unity of the faith, by their different expositions of Scripture,...the confessions reveal the divided nature of the Church itself....There is so little unity that although we can recognise the common confession of the Christian faith.....we cannot do so in the confession made concerning these points.”<sup>x</sup>**

We love our Reformed heritage, our common confession and our life together to this point in our history as the Presbyterian Church in Canada, but we can truly see no other way forward than such artificially structured "unity." Far more helpful - and healthful - we believe would be a respectful separation of the two parties involved (those desiring, based on God's Word, to maintain the traditional definition of marriage and ministry, and those desiring, based on that same Word, to work for full inclusion of their LGBTQI brothers and sisters).

## VII. Conclusion

We are reminded of our common stance on divorce in *Living Faith*:

**“When a marriage is shattered beyond repair, it is sometimes better that it be dissolved than that the family continue to live in bitterness.”<sup>xi</sup>**

It has been given to you, as our past moderators, to find a way forward that maintains the integrity and confessions of both sides in this current debate. We are of one mind that a gentle division better maintains the continuing unity of Christ's Church, than continuing to be at war with one another over what we believe we must confess.

## Endnotes

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Walter Bryden reminds us that **“Calvin undoubtedly dreamed of a universal Protestantism and laboured hard on behalf of such a cause,”** But **“The real position of Calvin...can be understood only if we recognise the fact that he could conceive of Union only on a basis of strict theological understanding.”** Bryden, Walter. *Why I am a Presbyterian*. Essence Publishing. 1997. P. 128,129.

<sup>ii</sup> Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Trans. Ford Lewis Battles. Westminster. 1960. IV, II, 2.

<sup>iii</sup> Bloesch, Donald. *The Church: Sacraments, Worship, Ministry, Mission*. Intervarsity. 2002. P. 253-254

<sup>iv</sup> In his wisdom Berkouwer asserts, **“By dealing first with the unity and catholicity of the Church – so much is the centre of interest at the present – we do not mean to attach priority to these attributes at the expense of apostolicity and holiness. All aspects are so closely connected that any such priority is unthinkable.”** Berkouwer, G.C. *The Church*,

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1976, as quoted in *Reformed Reader: A Sourcebook in Christian Theology. Vol #2 Contemporary Trajectories*. Westminster. 1993. P. 257.

<sup>v</sup> "We are thinking of the extensive exegetical notes in the *Genesis* commentaries of such internationally respected scholars as U. Cassuto, Gerhard Von Rad, Walter Brueggemann and Bruce Waltke. Von Rad states, for example,

**"The man... expresses his understanding immediately in the proper name that he gives the new creature. ... The linguistic consonance (*is "man"; issa "woman"*), upon which much depends here, can fairly be represented in English."**<sup>v</sup>

Regardless of the influences underlying these passages we feel the decisive point is that they are placed prior to the entrance of sin, and the cultural differences that follow. Submission of St. Andrews Presbyterian Church, Huntsville, Ontario to General Assembly 2017.

<sup>vi</sup> "Similar exegesis leads us to reject what has been proposed as a possible third option on this matter. To maintain the present teaching of our Church on this matter surely is incompatible with an offer "to bless" same sex marriage. Nor does such acceptance follow the Romans 14 passage as has been suggested. That discussion relates to the eating or abstaining from certain foods on the grounds of conscience. While indeed valuable for inter-personal relations today, the discussion clearly is not set within the creational context" Ibid.

<sup>vii</sup> "We believe that that the recognition of an enduring male-female relationship in marriage throughout Scripture also explains why there is no criticism of same sex marriage in the teachings of Jesus, and comparatively little in the rest of the Bible. We do not feel that this at all diminishes the Scriptural stand against such relationships. It rather shows that other norms simply were not an issue for the Hebrew people..." Ibid.

<sup>viii</sup> Submission of St. Andrews Presbyterian Church, Huntsville, Ontario to General Assembly 2017.

<sup>ix</sup> Bloesch. *The Church. op. cit.*, p. 110.

<sup>x</sup> In the midst of this Barth Says, "**Although there is always a feeling for the relationship to Jesus Christ and an appeal to the Holy Scripture and to certain documents of an earlier existing unity of faith, the relation and appeal have become so widely ineffective that in the decisions which are now necessary there is no unity in faith in Jesus Christ, in the exposition of Holy Scripture and in the understanding of those documents of an earlier unity.**" *The Word of God*. Volume 2, p. 632.

<sup>xi</sup> Presbyterian Church in Canada. *Living Faith*. 8.2.5. Wood Lake Books. 1984.