

**RESPONSE FROM THE SESSION OF ST. PAUL'S CHURCH, NOBLETON, ONTARIO
TO THE PAPER FROM THE COMMITTEE ON CHURCH DOCTRINE ENTITLED,
"ON THE QUESTION OF UNITY AND DIVERSITY"**

To The Reverend, the Committee of Past Moderators, The Presbyterian Church in Canada

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ:

Recently, the Stewardship and Doctrine Committee of the Presbytery of Oak Ridges proffered a series of questions to help Sessions get the conversation going with respect to the study paper, "On the Question of Unity and Diversity". Knowing that you are keen to have responses as soon as possible, the Session of St. Paul's Church, Nobleton, Ontario used the questions supplied, after a fashion, to craft the following response, which we hope is in some way helpful as you discern what may be a way forward for The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

Please count on our prayers for the important work you undertake.

What do we mean by unity? What are we committing to when we commit to the unity of the church? What is the church we're trying to keep unified?

When Jesus prays to the Father in John 17.21 that they "all will be one", he is referring to (a) his original disciples, and (b) those who will be disciples throughout time after the apostles. What Jesus seeks is a unity that is characteristic of the unity shared within the Godhead - "that they will all be one, just as you and I are one - as you are in me, Father, and I am in you." It is a unity of mind and heart, a unity of mission and purpose. Jesus knew that "Any kingdom divided by civil war is doomed. A town or family splintered by feuding will fall apart" (Matthew 12.25, NLT). He knew that if the church that would be birthed in his name with the coming of the Holy Spirit were to thrive, it would need to have unity in essential doctrine.

The reality is that there are many expressions of Christian faith, which we know as denominations. While there are many differences between them, the one essential doctrine that they hold in common is the Lordship of Jesus Christ if they are to be called Christian. How they worship, with what mode they baptize, how they view the Lord's Supper - these are considered non-essentials by most mature believers, since the Bible can be interpreted simply and variously to uphold a number of these approaches to church life.

The matter at hand, though, is that of the unity of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. It would be unwise for us to be overly concerned with ecumenical unity when the fabric of what holds our own denomination together appears to be tattered and at risk of disintegration.

To be more specific, it is the *visible* church that we seek to keep unified, since the *invisible* church is seen in its entirety solely by the Lord who sees all and knows all. And that is a formidable task indeed, since the visible church may be composed of both those who truly know and serve the Lord of the church, and those who might be deemed to be merely along for the ride. Since Jesus makes it clear in the parable of the wheat among the weeds that it will be his job at judgment time to separate the visible from the invisible church, we are called to leave judgment to him. Nevertheless, clear boundaries are helpful, and when they are articulated as essential or core beliefs, this helps unify the church around what it holds in common.

What is the basis of union in The Presbyterian Church in Canada? What are the core things every congregation shares - or *should* share? *will be answered along with...*

Many different denominations exist within the Christian communion. They exist because, on some key beliefs, Christians cannot compromise, even for the sake of visible unity. What doctrines divide

The Presbyterian Church in Canada from other Christian families? Which of these could be compromised for the sake of unity? What things do you consider essential for the church? How would we know if The Presbyterian Church in Canada has reached a point where visible unity is no longer possible?

It is almost amusing that the study document points out that, for example, the ordination of women is not an essential doctrine for all denominations in the global Christian community, while for us, it is – and then it does not permit latitude on that issue among people within our denomination who share the perspective of some denominations worldwide that do not permit the ordination of women. The notion stated in the study paper that the Roman Catholic tradition can embrace theological diversity because of their commitment to apostolic succession is simply not true; it is because of apostolic succession that there is virtually no room for theological diversity. The logical inconsistency in the study paper is flummoxing.

In a fallen, sinful world, the notion stated in the paper that a commitment to unity comes naturally is patently false. This is true within households (as was seen in the Church Union debate), within local churches (witness the ‘worship wars’ of years gone by) and within whole denominations. So while it is possible that we may make a verbal assent to unity as a motherhood-and-apple-pie issue, making a practical commitment to unity seems far less probable.

One of the reasons that The Presbyterian Church in Canada exists today is that there was a significant number of clergy and congregants who did not affirm the Basis of Union that founded the United Church of Canada. Perhaps one of our weaknesses is the breadth of interpretation of the important matters that held Canadian Presbyterians together: the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and the Westminster Confession of Faith, interpreted under the continual illumination of the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures. This is what we share, though there are literally hundreds of ways it is understood among the leadership of the church today.

Since our denomination allows for a great deal of freedom in a number of areas, such as worship style, and even mode of baptism (the Westminster standards noting that while pouring and immersion are acceptable forms of baptism, the church cannot rightly refuse the baptism of an infant of believing parents, under the covenant of grace), it must be polity and doctrine that deserve the focus when it comes to essentials.

Our polity is important to us as a connectional church. Our very name, “Presbyterian”, is derived from our system of church government – “by elders”, ruling and teaching. This is not being debated, though there are times when overtures have been made that might be understood to call our polity into question.

The reality is that there has been great diversity in the doctrines held by teaching elders (to say nothing of ruling elders and congregants). While pastors and elders, upon ordination and induction, are expected to affirm their assent to the Bible as the only rule of faith and life, and the subordinate standards as second in importance only to the Scriptures, one would expect that what is preached and taught in our churches would stand in adherence to any reasonable interpretation of the Bible, the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Declaration of Faith Concerning Church and Nation, and *Living Faith*. But it is widely known that this is not the case. Yet there is no discipline administered by Sessions or Presbyteries against those who teach or preach doctrine that is clearly contrary to these standards, by any reasonable interpretation. In fact, the last heresy trial held within The Presbyterian Church in Canada came shortly after the birth of the denomination in 1875, and the breadth of grace that was expressed to that minister, D. J. Macdonnell, characterizes the denomination even to the present day. Many other Reformed bodies would have disciplined Macdonnell to the greatest extent possible, given his views, but The Presbyterian Church in Canada, from its earliest days, demonstrated that the tent encompassing essential doctrine is a large tent

indeed. So it is, in one sense, not surprising that we face the current conundrum, given our tolerance for a very wide-ranging scope of interpretation of the Scriptures and the subordinate standards.

By not having a statement of specific essential doctrines adopted by the General Assembly and upheld by Presbyteries, we have allowed such wide-ranging beliefs that achieving unity seems almost impossible but by God's grace. While some would argue that the subordinate standards specify our essential doctrines, the higher courts of the church regularly turn a blind eye to Sessions and ministers who flagrantly teach against or practice many statements made within our subordinate standards.

Because of our track record of avoiding disciplinary action at all costs on matters of doctrine, it would seem that unity as a denomination would be very difficult to achieve without an almost draconian level of enforcement by the higher courts.

The Paper notes sessions have significant but not unlimited freedom to order the congregation's life and mission in response to local circumstances. The question of admitting baptized but not yet professing members to the Lord's Table is an area where sessions can make their own decisions in light of local mission needs. The question of admitting women to the eldership isn't. Why are these different? What makes one essential and one optional?

Many of the aforementioned Mr. Macdonnell's more controversial views reflected the culture of the day, in the 1870s, and would not all seem as controversial today. In the 1960s, in the wake of the women's liberation movement, the denomination's decision to move forward with the ordination of women to teaching and ruling eldership seemed like a shoe-in; after all, some other Protestant bodies had been ordaining women for as long as 60 years before the Presbyterians "caught up". Still, that was less of a divisive issue than the one at hand, for many reasons that are beyond the scope of this response. Today, these matters are seen culturally as a matter of 'rights'.

Admission to the Lord's Table, in a post-Christian society, is not seen as a matter of 'rights'; by the culture around us, it is seen as a non-issue altogether. An unchurched member of any community couldn't care less who gets to eat a cube of bread and drink a small shot of grape juice four (or seven, or twelve, or fifty-two) times a year. But today, an unchurched member of any community might have more interest over whether a woman is or is not permitted to exercise her leadership gifts in any part of the community, including the local church.

The study paper raises the matter of what constitutes essential doctrine for The Presbyterian Church in Canada. Initially, when the ordination of women was permitted by the General Assembly, freedom of conscience was allowed. Some years later, however, that freedom of conscience was revoked, and today, one cannot be ordained as a ruling or teaching elder if one does not affirm the ordination of women. It is worth noting that while the Scriptures, in certain places, can reasonably be interpreted to affirm women's leadership roles, the Westminster Confession says nothing on the issue.

The matter of same-sex marriage, however, cannot be affirmed through the Bible or the Westminster Confession, since each of these explicitly states that marriage takes place between one woman and one man. So it is reasonable that the ordination of women may be held as essential doctrine for The Presbyterian Church in Canada but not for other Reformed bodies, but the same cannot be said for same-sex marriage.

Officers in the Presbyterian Church promise "to follow no divisive course but to seek the peace and unity of Christ among your people and throughout the Holy Catholic Church." How does this question apply to the present controversy over sexuality? What does the promise commit officers to do? What unity do officers promise to uphold?

Teaching and ruling elders, and courts of the church, promise to conduct themselves as becomes Christ and his church. Beyond simple moral conduct, this also means that they abide by the stated doctrine of the church until it is changed by overtures adopted by the General Assembly, and the barrier act, whereby a majority of Presbyteries affirm changes by remit to the following Assembly. For 145 years (and longer, considering the origin of the method in the Books of Discipline), this tried-and-true approach has enabled the church to discern God's will for matters of doctrine and policy effectively and, for the most part, with a measure of unity.

Those seeking a change in the church's doctrine on sexuality blatantly took a divisive course by beginning their campaign for change through social media instead of the accepted method used by Presbyterians in Canada from the denomination's founding: by overture to the General Assembly. And no discipline was administered by any court of the church over it. This issue might not have gotten so heated had those seeking change been committed to the process by trusting the polity as a means of discerning the will of God. Instead, they opted to attempt to win their cause through popular opinion. This is what has led us to the current conundrum in The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

Officers in the Presbyterian Church also promise (that) they "accept the subordinate standards of this church, promising to uphold its doctrine under the continual illumination and correction of the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures." What are officers committing to do in this promise? In light of this promise, what should people do when they find they can no longer "uphold the doctrine" of the "subordinate standards" of The Presbyterian Church in Canada?

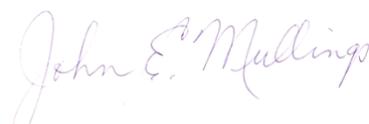
Beyond what is stated above, those who find that they cannot uphold the doctrine of the church should be invited to find a church home where the essential doctrines are in agreement with their position. This would happen in a gracious way if congregations, deciding to leave the denomination by majority vote, were granted the opportunity to depart with their physical assets.

If the numbers of people involved would leave the denomination in tatters, another option would be to adopt (through the accepted means) a form of polity that would create two synods under whose discipline congregations would fall, leaving the unity of the church held together by a common commitment to the Pension Fund and the Health and Dental Plan. Clerks, mission staff, and educational support workers would best be appointed by each synod. Does that seem like true unity? No, but there may be no other choice if the denomination is to continue to exist.

John Calvin, the great reformer whose labours led to the creation of the various Reformed churches around the world, believed that peace and harmony would be achieved in the church through truth, and truth, personified in Jesus Christ, is articulated through doctrine. In the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (IV.2.6), Calvin wrote that "when heresies and schisms arise, it is because men return not to the origin of the truth, because they seek not the head, because they keep not the doctrine of the heavenly Master."

We are a church that is "Reformed and always reforming, according to the Word of God" (the latter part of which the study document conveniently omits). And if we are reliant for change upon "the continual illumination of the Holy Spirit speaking in Scriptures", we know that the Holy Spirit will not move the church to enact doctrine which is contrary to the Bible. Any doctrine, then, which is based on an area of Scripture which might seem ambiguous in its interpretation must not be considered an essential doctrine.

Our hearts ache, as we believe Jesus' heart aches, for the current state of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. While many local enclaves of the church are largely unaffected by the wrangling going on at the level of the higher courts, we know that Jesus will prosper his church in the world where it is faithful to revealed in Scripture. And we pray for all disciples of one, even as he and the Father are one.



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his truth
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Jeffrey F. Loach, Moderator

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