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Fuller Theological Seminary

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THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD; LIVING TOGETHER IN THE LIGHT OF CHRIST; TRUTH AND COMMUNITY; JESUS IS LORD; THE REFORMATION AS A LIVING TRADITION

Theology, News and Notes

WINTER 2003

FULLER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY



SPEAKING THE TRUTH IN LOVE
Crisis, Conflict, and
Conversation in the Church

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Vol. 50, No. 1

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ABOUT THIS ISSUE

Speaking the Truth in Love

What Christians Everywhere Can Learn from Presbyterian Dialogue

Hardball is the dominant metaphor for American public life. Our political interchanges are confrontational, divisive, and dismissive.

Truth is not something we expect to emerge from a conversation. It is something we hope to impose. Balance and fairness are casualties on evening radio and television shows as two, three, and sometimes four voices contend simultaneously for dominance. Volume and intransigence are the new civic virtues. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, reasoned discourse has given way to in-your-face sound bites.

It is no surprise, I suppose, to find the tone and temper of American politics shaping the debates within our churches. Historically, mainline congregations have addressed the great social issues of the day. The abolitionist movement of the nineteenth century was populated by Congregationalists and Baptists. Methodists led the prohibition movement. A Presbyterian president, Woodrow Wilson, forged the path for the League of Nations. Catholic bishops have spoken with pointed conviction on topics from capital punishment to international economic justice. And within the last two decades, conservative Protestant voices have advocated for the rights of unborn children and prayer in public schools.

Even if it is not surprising, it is disappointing. My concern has nothing to do with the postmodern critique of reason in Western culture, nor will I allow it to be dismissed as a mere plea for politically correct thinking. This is a fundamental matter of integrity. If we believe in the gospel of reconciliation, hardball is a game we can ill afford to play. The world has a right to expect our conversations to be consistent with our beliefs. As Cecil M. Robeck observes in his article "Truth and Community," Muslims have for centuries viewed the divisive disputes within the Christian community as a sign of God's judgment on the church.

In the fall of 2001, at the prompting of President Richard Mouw, Fuller Seminary invited a group of Presbyterian pastors and officers to consider how this seminary might contribute to the life and mission of the Presbyterian Church (USA). Although Fuller is not a Presbyterian institution, the largest block of students at this seminary are Presbyterian. And the PCUSA is well represented in the faculties of Fuller's School of Theology, School of World Mission, and School of Psychology. Currently, there are 18 faculty members who are either ordained in the PCUSA or members of its congregations. The health and wholeness of the Presbyterian Church is a matter of particular impor-

tance to us.

Out of those deliberations, a consensus quickly emerged on three key points: First, the participants agreed that frank but respectful conversation was preferable to rancorous threats to split the church. The desire to engage in genuine dialogue rather than to play hardball was a deep and unanimously held conviction. This concern led to the second point of consensus, the proposal that Fuller Seminary would host a consultation to encourage conversation among Presbyterian pastors of differing persuasions. Finally, we decided to ask Barbara Wheeler and Richard Mouw to speak to the concerns we had for the church from the framework of their long-standing friendship.

Richard is a recognized spokesperson in conservative, evangelical circles. Barbara Wheeler is the president of Auburn Seminary, an institution that is often associated with positions at the other end of the theological continuum. Barbara is also a member of the Board of Directors for the Covenant Network, a coalition of Presbyterians who advocate the full inclusion of gay and lesbian people into the PCUSA. Their deep friendship encompasses their common heritage in the Reformed tradition, as well as the points on which they disagree. Their honest and respectful keynote presentations set the tone for the Consultation for Presbyterian Pastors held at Fuller Theological Seminary on May 6 and 7, 2002. A high point of the consultation came during a question-and-answer session which followed their presentations. In response to a comment from the audience about the possibility that the PCUSA might split apart, both Barbara and Richard stated that they would not want to be part of a church in which the other was unwelcome.

Joining the two presidents at the lectern were Fuller faculty members Marianne Meye Thompson, John Thompson, and Cecil M. Robeck. John and Marianne are both ordained ministers in the PCUSA. Marianne Meye Thompson is professor of New Testament interpretation, and her address on the lordship of Christ offers profound insights about the way the church engages a pluralistic society with the gospel. John Thompson is professor of historical theology, with a particular interest in Calvin. His presentation takes us to the roots of the Reformed tradition to recover guidelines for engaging divisive questions.

Cecil ("Mel") Robeck, professor of church histo-

The Steering Committee for the Consultation of Presbyterian Pastors at Fuller Seminary is composed of the following members: Roberto Colon, Associate Executive, Presbytery of San Fernando; Lucy Guernsey, Director of Alumni/ae Relations, Fuller Seminary; Eric Hoey, Pastor, True Light

ry and ecumenics, and an ordained minister in the Assemblies of God, was the only non-Presbyterian voice among the plenary speakers. An ecumenist by calling and a historian by training, Mel brought a significant voice to the table. As a regular partner in dialogues with the Catholic and Orthodox churches, he has some cautionary reflections for those of us who turn quickly to what is disparagingly called the default Protestant solution, i.e., schism.

Evaluations from the participants were overwhelmingly positive. The most frequent comments were, "You need to do this again," and "This is the kind of conversation we need to have in the church." These comments led us to schedule another consultation. It has been set for January 21 and 22, 2003, on the theme "Hope and Fear: Moving Ahead in Mission Together." We encourage you to visit the website which has been set up for the next Consultation for Presbyterian Pastors at www.fuller.edu/cll/html/wcpres.html. You will find information about how to register as well as expanded versions of the presentations by Marianne Meye Thompson, John Thompson, and Mel Robeck contained in this issue of *Theology, News and Notes*.

The comments about the need for this kind of conversation also led us to approach the Editorial Board of *Theology, News and Notes* to see whether these five presentations might be of more general interest. The board concurred, and we present these reflections in the hope that they will encourage Christians of all kinds to engage each other with honesty and hope. May the God of grace and truth lead us all faithfully into the future together.

Ron Kernaghan,
for the Steering Committee



RONALD J. KERNAGHAN, Ph.D., is the integrator of this issue of *Theology, News and Notes*. A long-time member of the Editorial Board of Fuller's ministry journal, *Dr. Kernaghan* has served as a Presbyterian minister since his ordination in 1981, most recently as senior pastor of La Habra Hills Presbyterian Church in Southern

California. He became the director of the Office of Presbyterian Ministries at Fuller Seminary in 1999, and assistant professor of Presbyterian ministries and pastoral theology. While mentoring Presbyterian students at the seminary, he continues to serve on several Presbyterian councils, committees, and task forces.

Presbyterian Church; Lydia Sarandon, Associate Pastor, St. Andrews Presbyterian Church; Esther Smith, Associate Pastor, St. Peter's by the Sea; Jan Sperry, Stated Clerk, Presbytery of San Fernando; Ken Working, Executive Presbyter, Presbytery of Santa Barbara.

For TN&N readers who are less familiar with the Presbyterian Church (USA), we offer the following comments. The two issues which have attracted the most controversy recently are the ordination of gay and lesbian people and the person and work of Jesus Christ. The PCUSA welcomes gay and lesbian people as church members. It also requires that all ordained officers live faithfully within the covenant of marriage or in celibacy. And last summer the PCUSA approved a document titled "Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ" to clarify its understanding of Jesus Christ. This document can be downloaded from the PCUSA website www.pcusa.org.

The Sovereignty of God

Living Together in a Troubled Church and Broken World

BY RICHARD J. MOUW

As I reflect on basic themes in the Calvinist Reformation, I am especially interested in what these themes mean for present-day discipleship. What does it mean to live out the worldview of Calvinism in today's world?

In his great work *The Freedom of the Will*, the Puritan theologian Jonathan Edwards said: "However the term 'Calvinist' is in these days amongst most a term of greater reproach than the term 'Arminian'; yet I should not take it all amiss to be called a Calvinist, for distinction's sake."

I agree. For me, the label tells you what I believe and what I don't believe, what I am and what I am not. In my thinking, Calvinism still makes an important distinction, and so I take it not at all amiss to be called a Calvinist for distinction's sake.¹

In an essay titled "The Defense of Calvinism," Charles Spurgeon said, "If anyone should ask me what I mean by a Calvinist, I should reply: He is the one who says *Salvation is of the Lord*. I cannot find in Scripture any other doctrine than this. It is the essence of the Bible. 'He *only* is my rock and my salvation.' Tell me anything contrary to this truth, and it will be a heresy; tell me a heresy, and I shall find its essence here, that it has departed from this great, this fundamental, this rock-truth: 'God is my rock and my salvation.'² That's what it's all about. God is sovereign and we are helpless sinners.

What does it mean for us today to say that? For one thing, it means that we certainly need to hear God's sovereign call to discipleship. This is essential to the idea of divine election. Suppose that George W. Bush were elected and for four years did nothing but commission studies about how he got elected. And every time he spoke to the nation, he would talk about how wonderful it was to have been elected and how privileged he was to have been elected and how undeserving he was to be elected. We would want to ask him, "What did we elect you for?"

That's an important question for Presbyterians. By sovereign grace through the wounds of Jesus, we have been restored to fellowship with God, and we have been elected to participate in a covenant community. We claim the promises of a faithful God who then strengthens us through word and sacrament and the discipline of the church to show forth God's sovereign rule to a world that is full of racism, misogyny, superstition, environmental perversions, and false ideas about God. We are elected as a covenant community

to show forth the sovereign rule of God over all of life.

I read a fascinating book several years ago by a Mormon scholar, O. Kendall White. It was called, surprisingly, *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy*. In it, the author complains that a number of younger Mormon scholars are beginning to sound too Calvinistic. They argue that Mormons have to see the *Book of Mormon* through the lens of the Epistle to the Romans. To the contrary, White maintains that Joseph Smith, for all the idiosyncrasies of Mormonism, agreed with the emerging Protestant liberalism of his day on three things: that there is a finite God, that human beings are capable of self-perfection, and that salvation comes by works. That, he contends, stands in radical contrast to the themes of the Calvinist Reformation in which God is sovereign, human beings are helpless to do any good apart from God's mercy, and salvation comes by grace alone. White urges his fellow Mormons to choose: Either believe in a finite God, in the capacity of human beings to work toward perfection, and in salvation by works—or believe that we have a sovereign God, and that we're totally incapable apart from sovereign mercy to do anything about our salvation, and that salvation is by grace alone.³

I think he's absolutely right. This is the crucial choice. And, frankly, I want to say that the Presbyterian Church (USA) needs to make that choice. I don't believe that choice falls along the lines that we typically think of as *liberal* versus *conservative*. I have many friends, including Barbara Wheeler, who call themselves "liberal," but who believe profoundly that we have a sovereign God, that we're helpless sinners apart from sovereign mercy, and that salvation comes by grace alone. We all need friends like these to keep us honest.

Second, we need to hear God's revealed pattern for ordering the creation in general and in our church relationships in particular. I know there are many jokes about our Presbyterian commitment to doing things "decently and in order." But if we really believe that human beings are in deep trouble and need constant ruling by God, *order* is a very important concept. Fifteen years ago, in a report that President David Hubbard commissioned about a controversy on "signs and wonders" at Fuller Seminary, Lewis Smedes wrote, "The presence of God is an orderly presence. As God formed the world, so God also keeps forming it. God is the creative bulwark against spiritual disorder, moral chaos, and physical disease. God moves so reg-

ularly that we can speak of God's creative paths and natural laws. What we call the laws of nature are laws only because the God of creation continuously orders as God upholds God's creation."⁴ We find that "ordering" God in Calvin. Susan Schreiner has written a wonderful book on Calvin's view of nature. She finds in Calvin a universe that would be fragmented if God's Spirit were not constantly holding all things together.⁵ That very important theme in Calvinism underlies our deep commitment for preserving order in the church.

Chapter 20 in the *Scots Confession*, titled "General Councils, Their Power, Authority, and the Cause of their Summoning," affirms:

*As we do not rashly condemn what good men, assembled together in general councils . . . set before us; so we do not receive uncritically whatever has been declared to men under the name of the general councils, for it is plain that, being human, some of them have manifestly erred, and that in matters of great weight and importance. So far then as the council confirms its decrees by the plain Word of God, so far do we reverence and embrace them.*⁶

That is a very minimal statement of respect for general councils. The *Confession* goes on to say that the primary reason for councils "was partly to refute heresies, and to give public confession of their faith to the generations following, which they did by the authority of God's written Word, and not by any opinion or prerogative that could not err by reason of their numbers."⁷ The primary reason for holding councils, then, is to make sure that heresies don't creep in.

Second, the *Confession* continues, "that good policy and order should be constituted and observed in the kirk where, as in the house of God, it becomes all things to be done decently and in order. Not that we think any policy or order or ceremonies can be appointed for all ages, times, and places, for as ceremonies which men have devised are but temporal, so they may, and ought to be, changed when they foster superstition rather than edify the kirk."⁸ To police the boundaries of the doctrines of the church and to be an instrument of God in imposing good order in the church is pretty minimal stuff. That suggests that we should not get too excited about what General Assemblies do or do not do. They are going to make mistakes. It has happened before, and it will happen again. The important thing is to order our lives as instruments of the ordering work of God.

Third, we need to recognize in our own time God's mysterious ways. I have gone through various stages in my relationship with Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul says to Timothy, "From childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15). That's my story. From my earliest days I knew the embrace of a loving Savior. When I went to catechism class, I learned that my "only comfort, in life and in death" is that "I belong . . . to my faithful

Savior, Jesus Christ."⁹ That is a wonderful foundation.

In college I became interested in philosophy. I got very interested in the lordship of Jesus Christ, especially his lordship over thought. I was intrigued by the challenge of bringing every thought into captivity to the lordship of Christ. This desire to develop a Christian worldview motivated me to go on to graduate school. As a student during the radical sixties, I stood in the protest lines. I helped occupy the administration building at the University of Chicago. I was involved with issues of civil rights, antiwar demonstrations, and environmental protests. And I struggled with what all of that meant, because I did not find a lot in my evangelical background to help. Eventually, I came to affirm that those social and political concerns fell under the kingship of Jesus Christ. Abraham Kuyper proclaimed that "there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence which Jesus Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry out, 'Mine!'"¹⁰ I believe that. He's the Lord of Wall Street, the Lord of Hollywood, the Lord of UCLA, the Lord of Moscow, the Lord of Beijing. He's the Lord of all creation. And our job is to acknowledge that, even though the rest of the world may refuse.

My fourth stage is not easy to describe. My theology has gotten a lot messier in recent years. I work very closely with the American Jewish Committee, and I struggle a lot with the current status of the Jewish community in God's covenant. At points in Romans 11, it sounds as though Paul is saying that the Jews have been cut off; and then in other places, it sounds as though they still really belong. Sometimes I think to myself, "Come on, Paul. Just say it, will you?" I want one clear, unambiguous statement. Do you remember what Paul did at that point in Romans? After all was said, he just started singing, "O the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, his paths beyond tracing! Who has known the mind of the Lord?" (Rom. 11:33-34).

I know that I must witness to the power of Jesus Christ, but I also know that the ones to whom I am witnessing are in the hands of God. Dale Bruner put it so nicely in a speech he gave at Fuller. We have a God, he said, who is "vertically *exclusive* but horizontally *inclusive*." There is only one Savior, but that Savior has a huge reach. There are certain times when all of our witnessing is done and we're not quite sure of the outcome, and all we can do is bow before God's mysterious ways.

One of the oft-quoted verses in the Calvinist tradition is Deuteronomy 29:29: "The secret things belong to the Lord, but the things revealed belong to us and our children forever, that we may follow the words of this law." The secret things belong to God, but we have to be faithful. I have struggled a lot with what it means to be faithful in the aftermath of September 11. The Jewish position has always been that we cannot finally understand God's intentions or

We are elected as a covenant community to show forth the sovereign rule of God over all of life.

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design, so we continue to pray. I have to add that we continue to pray at the cross of Jesus Christ. At the cross we have a powerful reminder that however we understand the silence of God, it is not the silence of indifference. It's the silence of God's own suffering. It is God himself who said, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46). The silence of God within the very community of the Godhead is a profound and awesome mystery.

God's mysterious and surprising workings in the world ought to lead us to a very expansive view of what God is doing. Calvinism has often been a stingy theology. One text that was often preached by Calvinists on the question of the number of the people to be saved is found in Luke 4:27: "There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." So also, many Calvinists concluded, is there a small number of the elect.

I think, on the other hand, that modern Presbyterians should prefer the vision of Revelation 7:9, in which John saw a multitude that no human can number, gathered from every tribe and tongue and nation of the earth, a company whose robes have been washed clean through the blood of the Lamb and who sing continually before the throne. That's a marvelous truth, and it is also a wonderful church-growth vision. We're headed for a multitude that no human being can number. I agree with the Canons of Dort, which declare that the gospel must be proclaimed "promiscuously and without distinction" to all peoples.¹¹ From a Calvinist point of view, it is the only good kind of promiscuity. We must proclaim the gospel promiscuously and without distinction, because God, in God's own mysterious way, is preparing the creation for something beyond our comprehension.

Finally, to understand the sovereignty of God for our own time is also to hear God's call to *humility*. That means, among other things, *ecumenical* humility. I am an eclectic Calvinist. I have learned so much from my Pentecostal, Wesleyan, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox sisters and brothers. I think we all ought to be eclectic. We need to recognize how mean-spirited we've been in the past. I have no problem combining the belief in God's sovereign grace and God's sovereign rule over all things with an openness to all that the Lord can teach us from other traditions, including other strands of thinking within the PCUSA.

One of the truths that is revealed in the Scriptures is the fact of our own finitude and sinfulness. We Calvinists ought to be very clear about that. We need a good reminder of our own sinfulness and finitude as we conduct our present debates. It's too often missing but, as Calvin himself observed, the three main precepts of the Christian religion are humility, humility, and humility.¹²

Charles Finney wrote that every time Presbyterians gather in their General Assemblies, there is a jubilee in hell.¹³ I think that is wrong-headed. But

there may very well be new jubilees in hell if, at our General Assemblies, we do not show humility together before the Word of God. Those of us who consider ourselves to be mere Calvinists—mere Reformed Christians—need to be calling all of our sisters and brothers in the church to bow in humility before the Word of God. We do not and will not come up with exactly the same interpretations, but to be a Presbyterian means, among other things, to bow together in humility before the Word, seeking by the power of the Holy Spirit to hear what the Word has to say to us. We must listen to the Word of God together in humility.

Calvin knew that sinful, depraved human beings always put the best possible interpretations on their own motives and the worst possible interpretations on their enemies' motives. It is time for Presbyterians to apply the hermeneutic of suspicion to ourselves and the hermeneutic of charity to our opponents. I think that is such an important Calvinist word for our church today. We should pause and ask, Are we being driven by illicit passions? Have we reflected on the common humanity, indeed, the common humanity in Jesus Christ, that we share with each other? We may still have profound disagreements; we may still find that the resolutions are elusive. The issues which divide us are difficult, but applying the hermeneutic of suspicion to ourselves and the hermeneutic of charity toward those with whom we disagree is not just good Calvinism. It is good, biblical Christianity.

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RICHARD J. MOUW, Ph.D., president of Fuller Seminary, although brought up in the Reformed tradition, has shown a strong commitment to all evangelical traditions. An internationally acclaimed scholar, administrator, and theologian, he is widely sought as a lecturer and conference speaker. Dr. Mouw is the author of 13 books, among

them *Uncommon Decency* (*InterVarsity*, 1992), and the award-winning titles *The Smell of Sawdust* (*Zondervan*, 2000) and *He Shines in All That's Fair* (*Eerdmans*, 2001).

Living Together in the Light of Christ

BY BARBARA G. WHEELER

"You know what hour it is, how it is full time now for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed; the night is far gone, the day is at hand. Let us then cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us conduct ourselves becomingly as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires" (Romans 13:11-14).

Our salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. I think—here's my outrageous claim—that this is true even for the Presbyterian Church. I believe that the Presbyterian Church is Christ's actual body in which we are being carried by his Spirit ever closer to God. I know, of course, that a denomination is a human arrangement, a very provisional form of the church. Nothing in Scripture or in Christian tradition says that we must keep denominations going forever, or even create them in the first place. Reinhold Niebuhr and other critics are certainly correct that denominations are signs of our finitude, of our incapacity to be the church, the whole church, and nothing but the church all together. But they are also measures of God's providence for God's limited and sinful creatures, one way that a gracious God supplies our deepest needs. Life together with other friends of God, Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us, is a privilege, one that we have not earned, one that our Lord himself, who lived in the midst of his enemies, did not enjoy. "Only by gracious anticipation of the last things," he writes, are "Christians privileged to live in visible fellowship with other Christians."¹

I believe that, friends. I believe that for all the Presbyterian Church's infamous differences, divisions, conflicts, and warring affinity groups, membership in it is a privilege, an eschatological sign, a gift of God. And I am convinced—this may sound preposterous to some of you, but I really believe it—that you and I, self-acknowledged liberals and conservatives, have been given to each other by God for the outworking of our salvation. We do not save ourselves, or each other, but we do help each other to live into what salvation means. And I believe that we have been given to each other for that purpose.

By the indicators used these days to sort among Presbyterians, I am a *liberal*. I helped to establish the Covenant Network; I do not think that same-sex

acts are innately sinful; I am alarmed by home-grown confessional statements that reduce complex doctrines to short formulas. I'm a liberal. And I believe that you who differ from me on these and other important matters were given to me by God, in support of my salvation. I am going to try to prove my point the evangelical way, by testimony. I will tell you how evangelicals, many of them Presbyterians, have shaped my thought, strengthened my faith and, in my view, built up the church. And I will augment my account of what I've gained from you with some remarks about what I think my side has to offer. You'll have to decide whether any of those things would do your souls any good. But I will keep affirming my deep, if preposterous conviction, that because we have each other as opponents as well as Christian siblings, we are nearer now to our salvation—we live more fully in the light of Christ—than when we first believed.

How have you helped me to live in the day, as this passage says, to put on the armor light, to conduct myself becomingly? I have had a lot to do with you in recent years. For three years, I studied an evangelical seminary. I and several colleagues attended classes, lived for weeks at a time in the dorm, and wrote a book about the experience. I converse and correspond regularly with conservative Presbyterian Church leaders, and I have shared platforms with people like Richard Mouw, Gary Demarest, and Jack Haberer. Perhaps most important, I hang out a lot with wonderful conservatives in my own presbytery with whom I and some of my liberal allies are forging a kind of covenant. We, liberals and conservatives, have said we will make every effort to be transparent—no surprises, no political sneaking around (daylight rules apply). We will speak well of each other in and out of each other's presence and insist that others do the same [becoming conduct]. We will do all we can to avoid legislative and judicial confrontation, and devote our time together instead to study and to prayer, to putting on Christ, who we are finding is one seamless garment that fits all of us.

I am one fortunate person, to have gotten to know so many of you so well. My faith has been strengthened and my soul refreshed by you. This has come about—here is my testimony—in three ways: First, I am a better Christian. I live more fully in the light, because you and I differ. The Presbyterian Church, as you surely must have

And I am
convinced
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conservatives,
have been
given to each
other by God
for the
outworking of
our salvation.

It is our great contribution to the church catholic to embody the tradition that is known to be theologically most serious of all the Protestants; and it is opponents who keep us serious.

observed too, has become a culture of complaint. We who strongly advocate certain positions complain of how much the other side has hurt us when we lose and even when we win. Those in the middle complain that we are wearing them out by forcing them to think and act on the issues we care about but they don't, very much. Your side and mine want to settle things our way, for good. Those in between want to drop those issues, permanently. Most of us have become great whiners. "Leave me alone," we plead. "Let me, let us, get back to normal, to everyday life, to real mission."

Well, friends, I have bad news and good news, and they are the same: For a Reformed church, this is normal, this is ordinary life, this is mission. This is what Presbyterians do best. We struggle—sometimes together, sometimes in opposing factions—we struggle for the gospel, as it says in Philippians, and we do not quit until we know the mind of Christ for the whole body. It is our great contribution to the church catholic to embody the tradition that is known to be theologically most serious of all the Protestants. And it is opponents, much more than like-minded allies, who keep us serious. Iron sharpens iron, it says in Proverbs, as one person sharpens the wits of another. Without criticism and challenge, we become dull, and our reasons for holding the positions we do turn into cliches.

Evangelicals have sharpened me, given my faith an edge it badly needed. Let me give you a specific example. As I indicated before, I think that God views homosexual and heterosexual practices in the same light. God graces both, so both can be used to give God glory in covenant relationships that mirror God's faithfulness to us. And God judges both, harshly and equally, when they are used—as all kinds of sexuality all too often are—in ways that damage other persons and dishonor God.

For a long time, I supported this position on homosexuality, using conventional liberal principles—inclusiveness, fairness, equal rights. Among my liberal allies, these arguments had wide acceptance. But as I began to spend more time with conservatives and discuss these matters, you pressed me hard. You reminded me that God is all-loving but not all-accepting. Some things are wrong, and God rejects them. You pointed out that the words "justice" and "judgment" come from the same root, in Hebrew as well as English. You can't have one without the other. You stressed that religious leadership is a privilege that none of us deserves, not an entitlement. And you made the irrefutable point that no Reformed argument can be settled apart from Scripture. You helped me to see that the pillars of my argument—fairness, equal rights—may be powerful civic concepts, but for my position to be taken seriously in the church, it would need stronger theological support.

Pressure from evangelicals sent me back to basics, and to the Bible in particular, not just for insight on this topic, but to gain for myself some of the deep guidance so many of you seem to find there. I know that some of my evangelical friends are disappointed that I do not discover in the Bible what they do, namely, specific rules for human cultural arrangements and social structures. The Bible, as I read it, is not chiefly about us. It is not, as J. Louis Martyn says, about "human movement into blessedness." It is about God—"God's liberating invasion of the cosmos" in order to redeem it.² On the issue in question, how we should view homosexuality and what policies we should make about it, the most relevant feature of God's invasive action seems to be the one revealed to Peter in his dream. God shows no partiality. God's righteous commands, scathing judgment, mercy, and grace are the same for all. It does not seem to me possible that, in the providence of such a God, the same motives, impulses, and virtually identical acts are the means of grace for one group and the road to damnation for another. The deeper I got into Scripture, the less likely it appeared that God would give human beings the capacity for faithful, sacrificial love—God's own kind of love—and then, on a mere technicality, insist that one group not use it.

I hope that you believe me when I tell you that my deep dive into Scripture has changed me profoundly. Even though on this issue I come out in the same place on policy questions, my position is, in effect, a different one than I held before. And in many other ways, I am a different Christian. Scripture anchors and regulates and molds and transforms my life in ways it did not before you pressured me to confront it and before you showed me—for all the differences in our hermeneutics—how that confrontation is accomplished. I can't tell you about most of the particular changes I've undergone—they're too personal. (I am one of those people who became a Presbyterian to minimize the chances I'd have to hug anyone or share anything.) But because we differ and push each other hard, Scripture exerts its authority in my life as it did not do before I met some of you and your comrades. I could not be more grateful.

What might I offer you in return? Well, you are welcome to my position on homosexuality. But somehow I think you are not going to take it—maybe someday, God willing, but not now. I can offer you the same comfort I've found as I have come to understand how seriously and consistently you read the Bible. We have a deep difference, but it is an interpretative difference among faithful believers, not a matter of one side having the faith and the Bible, and the other, not. That assertion has been made in both directions and it's wrong. If you believe it, get closer to us, and you may see it is wrong and maybe find some of the relief and joy I

have experienced in discovering that those strange folk on the other side are Christians, my very own brothers and sisters.

Probably the most important gift stemming from our differences that liberals can offer you, however, is an introduction to some other people who take the matter of the Bible and homosexuality seriously—very seriously, in fact—because their salvation, not other people's, depends on it: namely, gay and lesbian Christians who believe their sexual identity can be "practiced" in ways that are pleasing to God. Many on your side have been speaking and acting as if the whole weight of moral integrity in the church rests on this one small group. If they do what you think they should (shut their sexuality down for good), the church will be faithful. Case closed. Some of you have told me you know this, that your consciences are troubled at the way that the majority of us—all the monogamously married, not just conservatives—have kept the moral spotlight off of ourselves by fixing it on them.

If you are going to make this group the moral linchpin of the Presbyterian Church, you should at least listen to them. There is a large number of gay and lesbian Christians who are fervent, orthodox believers and who are convinced that the responsible use of their sexuality is not sinful. Most of you have not heard their testimony. That's partly the fault of us, their liberal advocates, who have talked to you a lot about their homosexuality—how natural it is, how ingrained, how resistant to being erased. You have argued that that does not make it okay, and you are right. The way things are cannot be automatically equated with the way God wants them to be. What you have not heard, and we cannot tell you for them, is their faith. Among our gay brothers and lesbian sisters are some heroic Christians who have sacrificed far more for their faith, and for this denomination, than any one of us has. Some are celibate, not because they think God requires it, but because we insist on it. And they want to remain in fellowship with us. Others have given up what sustains people like you and me, the privilege of leadership in this church, because they don't have the gift of celibacy. I wonder how many of us would have the moral fiber to make those trades? These are Christians of stature. You need to listen to them, not because they are homosexual, and not because they are nice and lovable (liberals have sentimentalized homosexuals mercilessly, and I'm sorry about that). We need them—their insights into Scripture, their questions about our way of life and, yes, their example. We need them if all of us together are to conduct ourselves becomingly as in the day—not in debauchery and licentiousness—if all of us are to live holy lives. If you want to hear from some of them—faithful Christians from whom you have as much to gain as I have gained from you—I will be happy to arrange it.

A second way you have nourished my faith is by proving to me that we are the same. Because liberal and evangelical Christians live in largely separate religious worlds and know very little about each other, even when we share a denominational affiliation, I am sometimes asked by liberal groups to talk about my sojourn among the evangelicals. The first question, when I finish my travelogue, is usually this: "What surprised you the most about evangelicals?" I think my questioners expect me to report something bizarre. And I have seen a bit of exotic behavior, including some Presbyterians who speak in tongues and cast out demons on a regular basis. But that hasn't surprised me. Indeed, I expected that you exotic Presbyterians, whom I knew only by stereotype, would be outlandish in some way. What I did not expect is that I would have so much in common with so many of you with whom I so deeply disagree.

At the risk of sharing, I will tell you about one of the many experiences that I've had that taught me this lesson. I was traveling to Pasadena, to one of Richard Mouw's conferences for evangelical seminary professors, scheduled just before Christmas. I had been invited to speak about my impressions of evangelical seminary life. I wasn't at all sure that what I had prepared would serve. I used three valuable upgrade coupons to secure a first-class seat in which I could concentrate on revising my remarks. As takeoff time neared, I was delighted to see that the seat next to me remained empty. I got out my papers, was about to spread them on the seat, and then, with just a few minutes to go, the seat was taken by a woman with a baby small enough to be carried in her lap, big enough to resist being restrained. The baby batted my computer and grabbed my papers. When these things were taken away from him, he kicked and screamed. Other passengers glared. I gave the flight attendant an imploring look. She banished the child and his mother—who was embarrassed, furious at all of us and, crying herself—to an empty row in coach. We all went happily back to work—they, no doubt, on topics related to mammon, I to writing about evangelicals and God.

I arrived at Pasadena, my talk perfected. Our meeting at Fuller began, as was the custom, with Dr. Mouw leading devotions and preaching a sermon. The focus was Christmas, Luke 2, the incarnation. As is his custom, he pointed up the text with the strong theology of hymns, in this case, Martin Luther's "Away in a Manger." A great hymn, said Richard, but one line is just wrong: "Little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes." "No," he said. "Not so. He cried for us. He died for us." I was cut to the quick. My presentation went fine, but I felt terrible all weekend. I knew that the Holy Spirit had instructed Richard to deliver that rebuke, that judgment on my self-importance and intolerance. When

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the sting wore off, however, I found I had learned a profound lesson about liberals and evangelicals, which is that the truth of the gospel trumps all our differences. Richard and I disagree, strenuously, about many things but, at the Spirit's bidding, he said what was needed to restore my soul. Together, joined in one faith, we are nearer now to salvation than when we first believed.

The experience of hearing the gospel preached by evangelicals, not just in sermons, but also in prayers and lectures and acts of kindness and mercy and social righteousness, has been repeated for me scores of times. It even happens where it is not supposed to, in theological discussions. You are going to think I have taken leave of my senses when I offer this next example, but I think this is true in the current, acrid debate about Jesus Christ. Many are saying that this is our deepest and most dangerous difference, one that could split the church. But, in fact, liberals and conservatives face a remarkably similar set of conditions.

How so? Well, the question at the heart of this debate is the most important one for all of us. It has been since the Christian movement began. Who do we say that he is? We have the same question, and we struggle with the same problems as we attempt to frame an answer. Both of our parties are under pressure from reductionists. You've got litmus-test confessionals on your side and I have some casual, "Y'all come" pluralists on mine. I don't mean to be harsh, but neither of these groups is going to produce a full and adequate answer. Even worse, many of us, on both sides, have a tendency to trivialize the question, to treat Jesus Christ, as a friend of mine observed, like a condiment, peppering his name over some of our most political pronouncements, when we should speak it with care, reverence, even awe. We should always speak it only to his glory, never for our gain. We do have a common resource, Scripture, and it does contain many strong assertions of who he is, but it is not univocal. Perhaps as a result, your most responsible theologians do not agree among themselves about what Christological tack to take, especially on the topic of salvation. Neither do ours. (Interestingly, some approaches on both sides substantially overlap.)

Who do we say that he is? Liberals and conservatives face the same critical question and very similar obstacles as we try to address it. My life, no less than yours, depends on the answer. Wouldn't it make sense, real Christian sense, to pursue this challenge by pooling what we know about the Lord of our lives? Out of my side's emphasis on the freedom of God and yours on fidelity to the lordship of Christ—and our common certainty of God's sovereignty and providence and our limitations and sinfulness—we probably could make a response that is powerful enough to honor our Lord and Savior

rather than (as we are now doing) cutting him up into little theological pieces with which we bombard each other.

I will go a little bit farther out on the limb from which I am already dangling and say that not only could we do a better job of proclaiming Jesus Christ together than we can separately but, I believe, it is for this purpose that we came to this hour: to help each other to know the Savior who was, and is, pleased to dwell among us. I and my friends need the toughness and tenderness and grandeur of Jesus Christ that you find in your relationships with him. I promised I would not tell you what is good for you, but liberals can show you a face of Christ that you may not gaze on as often, Jesus severely critical of principalities and powers, bent on turning everything inside out and upside down, so that nothing, including religious success, is quite the same. Imagine what a full-bodied, glorious Savior we can portray together! A divided church and a confused and shattered world is pleading with church leaders like you and me: "Sir, madam, we would see Jesus." Dear friends, why don't we join forces and try to answer them?

You evangelicals help me to conduct myself becomingly because you differ from me and keep me honest. Because you and I have the same Lord, and thus you can hearten me and instruct me and help me to serve him. And because some of you are so much *better* than I am. (This is not an easy admission to make.) Some Presbyterian conservatives are very hard to live with. I am a semi-regular target of your propagandists, who rearrange my words and twist my ideas until they sound sufficiently reprehensible to the constituency they are trying to stir up. And—granted that some of my allies are behaving in ways that seem intended to provoke challenges—some of your allies are more aggressively litigious than respect for law and order demands. The unfairness of your journalists and the militancy of your political and legal strategists do not leave me in a sentimental mood. But at the same time, I have to tell the truth, which is this: Among the evangelicals I have found some of the best minds, most generous spirits, and greatest souls that I have encountered. We Reformed Protestants don't talk much about saints, but we need them. In Christian religion, truth and love are not vague concepts. The theologian Thomas Torrance said that in our tradition, the truth is a person.³ We need persons to tell us the truth and model lives of love. In my personal catalog of holy examples, evangelicals can be found in significant numbers.

And not just individuals. I have spent a lot of time in evangelical churches. I don't like many of the ideas and opinions I hear there, but I deeply admire some of what I see. Liberal churches could use the warmth, and careful Christian nurture, and

serious talk about God that I have found in conservative congregations. I can't tell you whether you need us—that is for you to say—but I dread the possibility that any substantial number of conservatives will split off from this denomination. The Presbyterian Church needs your sturdy congregations and their leaders, because in some ways that are critical for faith, you have virtues and strengths the rest of us lack.

I want to say an additional word, under the heading "Better Than I Am," about Fuller Seminary and those who inhabit it. This is a genuinely conservative institution. I and some other liberals have spent a fair amount of time here, but not because Fuller is soft on liberalism. In fact, the dazzlingly intelligent conservatives at Fuller have challenged my liberal ideas and values much more seriously and strenuously than have conservative ideologues who are farther right and harder line. But Fuller combines its steady conservative convictions with some features that would be commendable in any theological school. Openness, for instance. Not everything is accepted here, but nothing is ruled out before it is inspected. Check out the Fuller Bookstore. You will find there a far wider range of works—Harold Lindsell and Beverly Harrison, cheek by jowl—than you can find in any other seminary bookstore, including those on the supposedly most liberal campuses. And Fuller's leaders and teachers have some sterling qualities that are in short supply in theological education. This seminary, the flagship evangelical theological school and arguably the most successful seminary in North America (maybe the world) is full of unpretentious people, including its president, who do not trumpet their faith but who also do not have the least hesitation about sharing it, and who know that their intellectual sophistication is not in the least compromised when they do so. There is a kind of Christian scholarly maturity that has been modeled by Richard Mouw and John and Marianne Meye Thompson and Robert Meye and others that has been deeply formative for me. The liberal side of theological education could use a double portion of Fuller's spirit.

So let us conduct ourselves becomingly as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. I was reading these words in Romans because I had decided to preach during Lent on a nearby text. In the middle of my sermon preparation, Richard called to invite me to speak at this conference. When I hung up and returned to my work, these lines took hold of me and insisted that I bring them here. Only later, when today's remarks were almost finished, did I remember the famous story about these verses taking hold of someone else. Take and read. *Take and read*. St. Augustine—in agony because he wanted to want God more than

human satisfactions but still didn't—heard a child in a garden chanting, "Take and read; take and read." He picked up a volume of the Epistles and his eye fell on these very words in Romans. He read them. "The light of confidence flooded my heart," he wrote in his *Confessions*, "The darkness of doubt was dispelled."⁴ His heart was changed; he was converted.

Salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. I hear a voice calling to us in this scripture, and I hope you do too. Just like Augustine and his friend Alypius, converted at the same moment, you and I have been given to each other to nourish each other's conversion. So, "Make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires." We need each other to lead holier lives. We need each other in order to proclaim the gospel with truth and power to a world that is literally dying for it. Pelting each other with Christological shrapnel is not accomplishing that. We need each other's trust in order, as Paul dictates, to put aside quarreling and jealousy and put on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Richard put it well in that Christmas sermon. Jesus cried for us. He still does. Presbyterian liberals and conservatives have caused each other a lot of suffering. I'm a Calvinist. I believe that God has permitted that, that it has been for a purpose, for our mutual correction. But Christ also died for us, and rose again. The night is far gone, the day is at hand. It is time for us to wake up. We are to form true and honest friendships in him, helping each other toward salvation. I fervently believe that God is encouraging this for an even greater purpose, so that we can go out, hand in hand, into the light of Christ, telling the world about the gift of God's own Son and thanking God for Christ's special gift to us: *each other*.

ENDNOTES

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (HarperSanFrancisco, 1954), 18.
2. J. Louis Martyn, "The Apocalyptic Gospel in Galatians," *Interpretation*, Vol. 54 (July 2000) 255.
3. Thomas F. Torrance, *The School of Faith: The Catechisms of the Reformed Church* (Harper and Brothers, 1959) xiii.
4. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (Penguin Books, 1961), 178.



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This seminary is full of unpretentious people who do not trumpet their faith but who also do not have the least hesitation about sharing it.

Truth and Community

Insights from the Past and the Present

BY CECIL M. ROBECK JR.

Recently, I received a booklet titled *Bearing with One Another: The Pastoral Task in Times of Struggle*. It was published by the Office of Theology and Worship of the Presbyterian Church (USA). My good friend Dr. Joseph Small, the director of that office, wrote the introduction in which he observed that "unlike many other churches in North America, the Presbyterian Church (USA) is part of an ecclesial tradition that is prone to fracture and fragmentation. Reformed churches are notorious for their tendency towards schism." He went on to note that other theological traditions that emerged during the sixteenth century have had their share of splits, but the Reformed family of churches has specialized in "disagreement, controversy, and separation. Too often," Small insisted, "division is not the last resort in Reformed churches, but the first instinct." From an ecclesiological standpoint as well as from an ecumenical standpoint, the portrayal of division within the Presbyterian Church (USA) that Joe Small sketched is a problematic one.

It is a fact that Presbyterians fight hard and talk a great deal of division. I want to suggest that while division may seem like a good idea at the time, it inevitably compromises the witness that the church is supposed to bring to the world—a witness to the reconciling power of God, in the person of Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. If we cannot be reconciled with members of our own Christian family, how can we expect our message of reconciliation to be taken seriously by those who are not part of the Christian family, those we hope to influence or evangelize?

I find the Koran to be quite compelling at precisely this point. I take it very seriously because it is a book that has formed the worldview and guides the daily lives of roughly a billion people. Its portrayal of Christians is mixed, but one passage stands out for me. It suggests that the divisions between Christians are the result of Allah's judgment because the church has been unfaithful.

With those who said they were Christians, we [Allah] made a covenant also, but they too have forgotten much of what they were enjoined. Therefore, we stirred among them enmity and hatred, which shall endure till the Day of Resurrection when Allah will declare to them all that they have done.

The question we might ask ourselves is this: How can we preach a doctrine of reconciliation with integrity,

if we are neither willing nor able to find reconciliation with those whose sister and brother we are?

My reading of the history of Presbyterianism in the United States suggests that while it has experienced a number of splits in its history, no substantial gains have ever resulted from these splits. During the nineteenth century, "Old school" Presbyterians never succeeded in winning over the hearts and minds of "new school" Presbyterians. And *new school* Presbyterians have never convinced *old school* Presbyterians to change.

In the disputes over slavery that separated Northern from Southern Presbyterians, the story is much the same. Northern Presbyterians did not really win over those in the Southern Presbyterian Church, nor did Southern Presbyterians ultimately conquer the Northern Presbyterians. Charges were made, military intervention that transcended the churches became the means of settling the dispute, and for roughly a hundred years, Northern and Southern Presbyterians were in a standoff.

Then there were the "liberal" versus "fundamentalist" debates that dominated much of the twentieth century. Liberal Presbyterians were no more successful at convincing their evangelical counterparts that they were correct than were evangelical Presbyterians able to convince liberal Presbyterians that they were correct. Each of them had good points to make, and the rejection of the other often meant that neither could do as well alone as they might have, had they stayed together.

The most one might concede regarding the effectiveness of all of these differences, and in many cases the splits that came with them, is that they may have served a very limited and temporary purpose. But if we were to look at the larger picture, neither side was ultimately able to claim victory for its particular witness. And when these groups merged once again, it can be argued that they both lost even more.

These days, there is much discussion within the Presbyterian Church (USA) on which direction to go, given current pressures that the church is experiencing against the backdrop of life and culture at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Some within the Presbyterian Church (USA), for instance, want to ordain homosexuals and/or reconfigure long-standing sexual mores. They read their authoritative texts—Scripture and the creeds—as propelling them to new levels of liberation that they believe are consistent with their understanding of the

gospel. They want the Presbyterian Church (USA) to be both open and affirming on this issue. Others within the church believe that to move in this direction is to compromise the very truth of the gospel, by accommodating to what they believe are the relativistic readings of the surrounding culture. Their reading of these same authoritative texts may lead them to accept sexually active gay and lesbian people into their congregation, while declining to ordain them.

A second issue facing Presbyterians is pluralism. This is as it should be, and it is consistent with values long held by the Reformed tradition. After all, we were human before we were Christian, and we should rightly consider ourselves to be members of the larger human community, in spite of our conversion to the Christ of the gospel. Some, however, have emphasized their solidarity with the human race to such an extent that they want to reposition Christian theology. In part because of their perception of the openness of God, they contend that everyone should come to the table as equals, even in faith. They maintain that God is working through a plurality of faith traditions to bring people to salvation. These people would halt Christian evangelization as a kind of outdated religious imperialism and replace it with interreligious dialogue.

More conservative Presbyterians also acknowledge that they are members of the larger human family. But these two families cannot be confused. These Presbyterians are not opposed to interreligious dialogue. After all, even the Apostle Paul engaged in interreligious dialogue, with both Jews and Greeks (Acts 17:1-4;16-34). But, like Paul, they insist on maintaining the historic position of the church regarding the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as God's only way of providing salvation.

Their participation in interreligious dialogue might include their acknowledgment that as part of the human community, even by working through various religious structures, they can and must work together on such issues of common concern as world peace, the affirmation of human dignity, the resolution of poverty, and the provision of health care. Yet they differ on one critical point, the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. As a result, they would argue that there is still a great need for sensitive evangelization in which Jesus Christ is lifted up, in no uncertain terms.

A third issue that is currently a matter of debate revolves around how Presbyterians and others should understand the nature and meaning of Scripture. This is not a new debate within American Presbyterianism; it has stood at the heart of most previous divisions. What has changed, perhaps, is the cultural context. In a more or less "postmodern" setting and in light of the growing secularization we see especially in the North and the West, how do we speak about the authority of the Bible? Can we really still read it as an authoritative text that makes sense in our new

context?

Should Presbyterians consider splitting again in order to make your points on these issues, or are there ways in which you can work together to make your ministry in the world more effective? I am not sure I have the answer to these concerns, but I hope to offer a perspective to your situation that you might not otherwise expect.

I am a minister with the Assemblies of God, and I am an ecumenical Christian. I have come to my ecumenical vocation in a way that is both Pentecostal and Reformed. My Reformed witness is that my ecumenical vocation came through an encounter initiated by the sovereign God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Calvin. It was at God's initiative, not at mine, that I entered into an ecumenical vocation. My Pentecostal witness is that my calling came through a vision or dream, with an appearance of Christ who spoke audibly to me repeatedly throughout one summer night in 1982. That experience was as vivid and vital as anything one might find in the pages of the Bible, and it utterly transformed my life and ministry. As a result I offer some reflections on my own ecumenical perceptions and my reading of Presbyterians with whom I have had much contact. You may wonder whether anything good can come out of Pentecostal perceptions. I don't know. But my job will be to present them to you as you continue to reflect on your own best way forward.

From its inception, the church has held to two core values: The first is *truth* and the quest for truth. And why should it be any other way? According to the beloved disciple John, Jesus proclaimed, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father but by me" (John 14:6). That is a very direct, very clear statement. "I am the truth." As we have valued Jesus Christ, so we have valued *truth*.

The second core value that the church has nurtured through the centuries is *community*. The church has attempted to live out this value in a variety of ways: in households and small groups, in local congregations small and large, in denominational life, in monastic life and, to some extent, in Christian organizations that are committed to interdenominational and/or ecumenical cooperation.

What is interesting about these core values is how difficult the church has found it to hold them together. All too often, we value the one and despise the other. We may pursue what we believe to be true, but in the process we exclude those who do not agree with us. In short, we violate what community we might have had.

Let me give you an example: Recently, I plugged my name in on the Internet to see what I would get back. Among other things, it came up with a website called "Iconbusters." I discovered that my name and photograph appeared on a page titled "Antichrist

I want to suggest that while division may seem like a good idea at the time, it inevitably compromises the witness that the church is supposed to bring to the world.

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Family Photo Album." It was there because I had participated in Pope John Paul II's Day of Prayer for Peace at Assisi in January 2002. For the developers of this site, "truth" was all that mattered. For them, that truth was that the Pope is the Antichrist. Those who participate in his ministry by offering prayer in a service that he moderates, they contend, have compromised. Do they want community with me? I doubt it. I have unknowingly violated their understanding of the "truth" and now fall outside the realm of their community.

On the other hand, we may prize community so strongly that we do not worry all that much about "truth," or we do not take the proper steps to guard the truth. How far can we press the limits of truth before community limits are snapped? Is it any longer possible for us to exercise ecclesial discipline marked by the truth of the gospel and still remain within the limits of Christian community? Some might argue that we fuss too much over the nature and extent of truth, while others might argue that truth has too often been prostituted to the elastic boundaries of a meaningless community.

We often treat truth and community as though they were mutually exclusive. We resist embracing these values if, when taken together, they result in any kind of sustained tension. On the one hand, we dispute many claims to truth that stretch the limits of our community. On the other hand, we challenge the viability of our community when we object to the limits or constraints that truth may bring to bear upon it. Under the present circumstances facing Presbyterians, I wonder whether either side has fully recognized the extent to which it does violence to the church when it fails to engage both values—truth and community.

In his book, *Truth and Community: Diversity and Its Limits in the Ecumenical Movement*, Michael Kinnamon argues that the interpretation of Scripture, historically our normative text, "must be undertaken by the whole church." I would agree with Kinnamon, though he seems to limit his "community of interpreters" to the present as they struggle to articulate what he calls "the truth of the gospel" for the current generation, and that does run the risk of relativism.

I would want to expand on Kinnamon's community by granting a place for history and tradition. Like G. K. Chesterton, who wrote a century ago, I want the broadest perspective possible. Chesterton said this about tradition in 1908:

Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about. All democrats object to men being disqualified by the accident of birth; tradition objects to their being disqualified by the accident of death. Democracy tells us not to neglect a good man's opinion, even if he is our groom; tradition

asks us not to neglect a good man's opinion, even if he is our father. I, at any rate, cannot separate the two ideas of democracy and tradition.

What this leads up to is a recognition that we need to get as much perspective as possible before we make any decision. Let me state the issue another way. When you wonder whether it is worth it to stay together any longer in the Presbyterian Church (USA), are you thinking about yourselves, or are you thinking about the church? The church, after all, has extended for centuries and is present throughout the world in many places and cultures.

One of the most difficult things for American Christians to understand is where they fit within the context of the global church. It may be because we have grown up with the concept of "manifest destiny" in the back of our minds, a concept that compelled us to move across the North American continent "from sea to shining sea" as an "elect" people with a mission to fulfill. We were to be a light to the nations. As Presbyterians with a healthy doctrine of election, you have embodied that destiny well. You have had your share of movers and shakers within American life and culture. You have produced presidents, senators, scientists, business leaders, and educators in abundance. You have brought your vision before the American people in numerous ways.

Presbyterians in the United States have also produced some of the earliest successful foreign missionaries. You have planted churches in every continent, and you continue to be bound to many of them as brothers and sisters. In spite of this spiritual bond with them, it is easy to overlook them in the midst of your own concerns regarding truth and community. It is easy to forget that while we may constitute a large number of believers in our own country, and therefore the positions we take are important, we may actually represent only a fraction of the global total that would give our positions perspective.

Let me give you a couple of illustrations: My own denomination, the Assemblies of God, has 1.5 million members with another 1 million adherents, for a total of 2.5 million regular congregants in the United States. When that number is compared to the 40 million Assemblies of God constituents around the world, it pales into relative insignificance. We account for less than 10 percent of our global membership. Then if we compare our 40 million constituents to the numbers currently being touted regarding the global Pentecostal movement, roughly half a billion, the total number within the worldwide Assemblies of God accounts for less than 10 percent of that total, and the place of the Assemblies of God in the United States shrinks to less than 1 percent. Yet if you were to visit our national headquarters, you might be tempted to think that it was the navel of the Pentecostal world. It is not. Nor is the thinking of the Assemblies of God, even at the national headquarters in Springfield, Missouri, always representative of the

thinking of the vast majority of Pentecostals around the world. Indeed, the churches we planted abroad are already coming into their own. And they are setting agendas with which we feel uncomfortable. For example, David Yonggi Cho, and the Assemblies of God in Korea, have joined the Korean National Council of Churches over the intense protests of the Assemblies of God in the United States. We have, in essence, attempted to control their actions in their culture by appealing to our experience within our culture without recognizing that the two cultures are quite different, and without admitting that their experience and their values within that culture might be different from our own.

The worldwide Anglican movement learned something of this in 1998 during its Lambeth Conference. As we watched from the sidelines, we saw the debate regarding the ordination of homosexuals raised to a feverish pitch. Some bishops in Britain and the United States became high-profile supporters of this cause. Their position dominated the coverage granted by the American press as it led up to the Lambeth Conference. One would have thought, by reading the papers, that this was, in fact, the new position of the Anglican World Communion. When the Anglican bishops came together at this global advisory council, however, the highly vocal and highly visible bishops who supported this position did not have the votes. The Anglican bishops of the two-thirds world rose up en masse, and sent a loud message to their British and American counterparts, in spite of the fact that they had been publicly ridiculed by them as backward and "superstitious." The vote of 526 to 70 [with 45 abstentions] condemned homosexual practice as incompatible with the Bible, and called for greater sexual integrity by members of the Anglican community worldwide.

It is important to remember that we are part of a global church, and while it may seem that our struggles are overwhelming, or that our positions are always right, when we view them from a global perspective, they may ultimately prove to be inconsequential. The vote at Lambeth sent a powerful message to the entire Anglican community, though its "spin doctors" and the British Parliament seem to have missed this point.

When splits occur within our churches, they raise problems not only for those who have been alienated within the church, but for the larger society as well. Those who are not part of the church do not always know where to turn for advice when confronted by spiritual, moral, and ethical dilemmas. Generally speaking, they turn to the group that continues to carry the name they recognize.

Until the merger of Northern and Southern Presbyterians in 1983, that was generally the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. As one national ecumenist told me early on in my ecumenical pilgrimage, "We never turn to the South

for advice." For more than two hundred years, Presbyterians have played a major role in shaping our national values. After the split over slavery, however, the Presbyterian Church of the United States (PCUS) did not carry the political clout that the church did in the North. Something similar could be said at the present time. People in the culture at large do not view the smaller Presbyterian Church of America as the voice of Presbyterianism in the United States. If they want a "Presbyterian" perspective, they will inevitably call the Presbyterian Church (USA) in Louisville, Kentucky.

What is significant about this simple fact is that it is the dominant church, that is, the largest body, the one that continues with the most historic ties, the one that keeps the property, that is given the privileged position by the dominant culture. In the case of current concerns regarding sexuality, pluralism, and the role of Scripture, those who maintain the name will maintain the power to represent Presbyterianism into the future. If evangelical members of the Presbyterian Church (USA) decide ultimately to leave the denomination, even to form a new one, and those who maintain the name are those who support the ordination of homosexuals, the broadening of salvific norms, and/or a relativized interpretation of Scripture, theirs will become the voice of Presbyterianism within the American cultural context. The evangelical voice will effectively cease to exist.

As I have participated in various ecumenical activities in the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, in the World Council of Churches, and, more recently, with the World Alliance of Reformed Churches over the past two decades, I have been struck by the extent to which the Presbyterian position is most frequently articulated from a "liberal" perspective. The evangelical voices of Presbyterianism that I have come to respect and appreciate are virtually nonexistent in those circles. Seldom do I hear the voices of Presbyterianism that I so frequently see represented at Fuller Theological Seminary and in many Presbyterian congregations around the country—*evangelical* voices. And I have wondered why. Could it be because you have chosen to absent yourself from those venues? If that is so, then I believe it to be a tragic mistake. Your presence and voice *does* make a difference.

If you are thoroughly committed to an evangelical position within the Presbyterian Church (USA), now is *not* the time to think about leaving. Now is the time to look again to the One who leads the church. Now is the time to look at the Word of God. Now is the time to seek perspective. As I look at the church today, new possibilities for cooperation are emerging, not merely and exclusively between the denominations that have historically participated in such places as the National and World Councils of

(Continued on page 19)

We often treat truth and community as though they were mutually exclusive. We resist embracing these values if, when taken together, they result in any kind of sustained tension.

If you are thoroughly committed to an evangelical position within the Presbyterian Church (USA), now is not the time to think about leaving.

Jesus Is Lord

How the Earliest Christian Confession Informs Our Proclamation in a Pluralistic Age

BY MARIANNE MEYE THOMPSON

The confession “Jesus is Lord” is foundational to the New Testament witness. It articulates the relationship of Jesus to God. In Acts 2:36-37, Peter proclaims that although Jesus was crucified, God has raised him up and “made him both Lord and Christ.” And Romans 10:9-10 links the confession of Jesus as Lord with the belief that God has raised Jesus from the dead. But perhaps best known here is Philippians 2:5-11, which affirms that God has exalted Jesus to a position of dignity and honor, given him the divine prerogative and power of judgment and bestowed on him the name above every name, *Lord*. This is what the creed summarizes in its assertion that God’s only Son, our Lord, is “seated at the right hand” of God, and has the power to “judge the living and the dead.” Put another way, from the perspective of the New Testament, it is not merely a human confession that is at stake here, but God’s own action in raising Jesus from the dead. Because *Jesus is Lord* articulates Jesus’ relationship to God, it is the necessary confession of the church.

Jesus as Lord and Biblical Monotheism

Not only does the confession *Jesus is Lord* point to God’s action, it is also crucial to describing the identity of God. Throughout the pages of the New Testament, there are formulations that link Jesus and God in inseparable unity, such as “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” or “the Lord Jesus Christ” (Paul, 1 & 2 Peter, James, Jude). Moreover, there are formulations that are incipiently if not overtly Trinitarian. For example, in Paul’s summary of his Gospel in Romans 1, he speaks of God, the Son, and the Spirit together in a way which makes it clear that these are inextricably related. The confession of Jesus as Lord is an essential component of the church’s Trinitarian understanding and confession of God.

In speaking of the risen Jesus as Lord of *all*, the church never abandoned its commitment to monotheism or its confession of “one God.” Monotheism is not ditheism. The point can be reinforced by the way in which Paul uses the Shema of the Old Testament: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone” (Deut. 6:4). In 1 Corinthians 8:6, in an explicit echo of this passage, Paul writes to the Corinthian church, many who had likely been relatively recently converted, and lived in a pluralis-

tic, pagan context: “For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.” Here Paul tears apart the Shema, with its affirmation that “the Lord our God is One,” into two affirmations: the first about God, the Father, and the second about Jesus Christ, the Lord.

The Shema is a statement in a personal form. “The Lord our God is one Lord.” The confession in 1 Corinthians 8 is akin to it, couched as it is in personal terms: “For us there is one God, the Father, and one Lord, Jesus Christ.” But neither Deuteronomy, nor the Jewish tradition which recites it, nor Paul who adapts it, could have meant, “There is one God for us—but another God for you.” Neither could Paul have meant, “There is one Lord for us, but another Lord for you.” Jesus can be named as “our Lord” because he is first *the Lord*. In other words, there is an absolute context for the personal confession. The assertion that God created the world is an assertion of God’s uniqueness. And in 1 Corinthians 8:6, as elsewhere in the New Testament, Jesus or “the Son” is spoken of as the mediator of God’s creating work. “All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.” . . . “In him all things were created, in heaven and on earth.” . . . “In these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.”

A second feature of Old Testament and later Jewish apologetic for the uniqueness of God appeals to God’s sovereignty. Not only is God the sole *creator* of all things, but God is the sole *ruler* of all things. Indeed, the two cannot be separated, for the God who *rules* over the world is the God who *made* the world. Again, Israel’s God is King or sovereign not only of Israel, but indeed of all the nations. In short, to speak of God’s sovereignty is to speak of the identity of God, who God is.

The New Testament presents the Son as the mediator not only of God’s creating work, but also of the universal scope of God’s sovereignty exercised through the Son. “In him all things were created” . . . “In him all things hold together” . . . “He is the heir of all things.” Both in the Old Testament and in Jewish apologetic, this language of “all things” points to the sweeping and all-embracing character of God’s sovereignty over the world: “The earth is the

Lord’s and all that is in it”—indeed, for God made it and God governs it. All things are God’s. Now the New Testament applies this language to Jesus as well: The Father has given “all things” into his hand. All things hold together in him. These affirmations attribute to Jesus divine activities and prerogatives. Furthermore, the recognition of Jesus as Lord is necessary in order to express the identity of Jesus in relationship to God’s creating and saving purposes in the world. The New Testament confession of Jesus as Lord reflects and adapts the biblical confession of the singularity and distinctness of the one God to include Jesus Christ within that confession—not as an option or addendum, but as a necessary confession. We confess one God, and one Lord: one God who made the world, one Lord through whom it was made; one God who governs the world, one Lord through whom God’s sovereign purposes come to expression. The individualistic confession “Jesus is my Lord” thus gets it somewhat right—but also wrong, unless it is a response to the universal confession “Jesus is Lord.” When we couch our confessions only in the first-person singular—“Jesus is *my* Lord and Savior”—we fail to articulate what is at stake in the designation of Jesus as Lord of all—that it is first in relationship to God and to God’s purposes for the world that the statement *Jesus is Lord* finds its proper place.

Jesus as Lord in a Pluralistic Empire

Much was at stake for the early church in this central confession. Any announcement of Jesus as Lord would inevitably have been heard as a challenge and an alternative to Caesar as Lord. To say *Jesus is Lord* means that Caesar is not. Hence, the confession *Jesus is Lord* had implications for conduct in private and in public, in the church and in society.

There are a couple of interesting passages in the New Testament in this regard. In Philippians 3:20 we read, “But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” The titles “Savior” and “Lord” are to our ears “religious” terms; they refer in the Old Testament to God, and in the New Testament to Jesus as well. For many they point to the personal experience of salvation. But *Savior* and *Lord* can also be found referring to Caesar, who offered deliverance and demanded allegiance. The following inscription from Priene in Asia Minor, dated to the year 9 BC, is notable. You need to have not only Philippians 3:20, but the words of Luke 2 ringing in your ears at this point: “A decree went out from Caesar Augustus” and “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” as well as the angelic announcement of the gospel, the “good news,” regarding “peace on earth.” This inscription reads as follows:

Decree of the Greek Assembly in the province of Asia

. . . Augustus, whom Providence has filled with virtue for the benefit of humanity, and has in her beneficence granted us and those who will come after us a Savior who has made war to cease and who shall put everything in peaceful order . . . with the result that the birthday of our God signaled the beginning of good news (euaggelia, “gospel”) for the world because of him.

There are similar later inscriptions and papyri which label other emperors as “God” or “Lord” or “Savior.” Hence, when such terms are applied to Jesus, there is little question that the gauntlet is being thrown down. For if Jesus is Lord, then Caesar is not.

One could also point to the notably pluralistic pagan context in which Paul’s early congregations struggled to live out their Christian commitment. Excavations from Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, and numerous other cities show cities replete with shrines and temples to a variety of deities—Isis, Apollo, Artemis, Athena, as well as to the emperors. Ancient inscriptions attest to prayers for healing and deliverance from peril and danger, offered up to these gods. People sought wisdom by consulting the various oracles. We have written documents that testify repeatedly to the sincere religious quests of ancient pagans, who sought to enter into experiences of the divine which offered them joy and peace. It was in such a context that Paul penned the confession of 1 Corinthians 8:6: “Indeed there are many so-called lords and gods, but for us there is one God and one Lord.”

The Confession “Jesus Is Lord” in the Context of Paul’s Churches

How, then, did this insistence—one God, one Lord—work out in practice in Paul’s churches? First, the confession “Jesus is Lord” was for Paul both absolute and necessary. It articulates what God had done through and in Christ. When Paul writes that for us there is “one Lord,” he surely did not mean that Christ’s lordship was limited to the church alone; and it most particularly did not mean that there were other viable contenders for the title. For Paul, the failure to understand that there is one Lord is tantamount to the denial that there is “one God.”

And so it is that ministers of the Word and Sacrament in the PCUSA are asked this question at their ordination: “Do you trust in Jesus Christ your Savior, acknowledge him Lord of all and head of the Church, and through him believe in one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?” The acknowledgment that Jesus is “Lord of all” is the beginning point of the church’s proclamation, as it was for Paul.

If we make the confession “one Lord” mean that Jesus is actually one of many lords, then we are by implication denying that there is one God. This is, of course, what the paganism of Paul’s day did say—there are many gods and many lords, enough for

If we make the confession “one Lord” mean that Jesus is actually one of many lords, then we are by implication denying that there is one God.

Because Jesus is Lord articulates Jesus’ relationship to God, it is the necessary confession of the church.

Pax Americana goes further, inculcating tolerance as the highest good—but the church can no more adopt that as its slogan than could the church of Paul's day.

temples and rituals and cults a-plenty in the cities of Corinth and Ephesus and Philippi and Laodicea. It is what the paganism of our day, with its intolerance for monotheism, says as well. The church in Paul's day benefited from living under the *Pax Romana*, but it could not adopt the state's tolerance for pluralism as its own. *Pax Americana* goes further, inculcating tolerance as the highest good—but the church can no more adopt that as its slogan than could the church of Paul's day.

Second, Paul's converts came from pluralistic contexts, and this pluralism permeated their thoughts to such a degree and to such an extent that understanding and living this confession were no easy matters. Paul had to not only socialize his converts into the ways of the Christian faith, but he did so without being able to presuppose that they had any prior knowledge of the Scriptures, or any conception of the uniqueness of God on which to build. Similarly, he had to work in a context in which there was little sense of the link between religious affiliation and moral commitment, such as is intrinsic to the Old Testament scriptural witness.

It is Paul's life's vocation to proclaim Jesus as Lord and to bring others to understand and live this out in thought, word, and deed. He did not think his work was done when people said it once or said it right. It was the stuff of which his entire ministry consisted. It is our vocation to proclaim Jesus as Lord and to open ourselves and to lead our people to understand what this means and how to live it out. And we can all constantly learn how to do this more faithfully.

Third, Paul labored to teach his churches that the one whom the local congregation in Corinth or Thessalonika or Philippi confessed as "Lord" was in fact not just a local cult deity, but the Lord of all. This meant not only that they were bound to each other within the local house church by a common allegiance, but also to all other bodies who confessed Jesus as Lord. The unique and universal lordship of Christ is the basis of the church; the claims made for Jesus are matched by the claims Paul makes for the church. The church is one universal, multiethnic, multicultural entity. To the extent that the church denies the universality of Jesus' lordship, it also denies its universal character and God's saving purposes for all creation. It may then become a local cult, even a cult with manifestations in various cities and countries (such as that of Isis), but it will not be the universal church of the Lord.

As Lesslie Newbigin puts it:

"The uniqueness and the universality are counter-parts of each other. To reject both in the alleged interest of mutual tolerance among the world's religions is to deny the message at its center. If there are many different revelations, then the human family has no center for its unity. If the Krishna of the Puranas and the Jesus of the Gospels are both revela-

tions of God, then we must say (and this is what Hinduism in the end does say) that God is unknown and unknowable. Each of us is, in the end, shut up in his own world of ideas. He must find God in the depths of his own being because there is no action of God by which he gives himself to be known by us" (The Light Has Come: An Exposition of the Fourth Gospel [Eerdmans, 1982], p. 43).

Fourth, the confession of Jesus as Lord indicates that a particular understanding of salvation is also in view. These two are inseparable. Salvation in Paul's view implies a right relationship to the creator, a relationship that calls for worship and faithful obedience. Right worship of God is thus at the heart of the life of the Christian church. In keeping with this understanding, one of the marks of the true church is "right worship of God." Because the church's fundamental confession is one which joins "one God, one Lord"—there is no right worship of God where Jesus is not also acknowledged and confessed as Lord.

To confess that Jesus is Lord is not to confess that in him we have found a way to God, but that in him God has embodied a way to us. To say there are many equally valid ways to God is not to make God more generous, but simply to make God generic. And a generic God, a God known apart from Israel's story and apart from the narrative of Jesus, is simply not the God of the Bible. What is imperative for the church to articulate today, if it is not simply to be assimilated into its pagan context, is a theology which does not cater to the lowest common denominator of confession, but stands with Paul in affirming in the face of every possible objection and obstacle: "There is one God, and one Lord." From that starting point, we may work together to bring the church to the point where "every knee will bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord."

Conclusion

Our context is no more pluralistic than was Paul's. The early church knew of the claims that there were indeed "many lords and many gods." Precisely in the context of such claims, Paul affirmed that there is "one God, the Father, and one Lord, Jesus Christ." Our world, too, knows of "many lords and many gods"—and many of them take the same form as they did in Paul's own day—nationalism, foreign deities, fate and fortune, and the pantheistic belief that all is God. In the ancient world, Christianity provided an alternative to the shapeless confusion of antiquity; in the modern world, it can provide the same alternative, but only if it articulates the gospel clearly.

It is urgent that the church have the courage to speak its belief in the one Lord. The church must be clear that it does not seek to add another deity to the pluralistic mix, but that it intends to bear witness to the Lord who is "above every name." The confession

that Jesus is "my personal Lord" is not the same as the confession "he is Lord." And unless we truly believe that he is Lord, we ought not to make the confession he is "my Lord," because to do so is tantamount to idolatry, honoring one lord among many lords.

But if we are to speak the gospel, we must be certain that our mode of confession matches the self-giving and self-emptying of the Crucified One. So question 52 of the *Study Catechism* asks, "How should I treat non-Christians and people of other religions?" Answer: As much as I can, I should meet friendship with friendship, hostility with kindness, generosity with gratitude, persecution with forbearance, truth with agreement, and error with truth. I should express my faith with humility and devotion as the occasion requires, whether silently or openly, boldly or meekly, by word or by deed. I should avoid compromising the truth on the one hand and being narrow-minded on the other. In short, I should always welcome and accept these others in a way that honors and reflects the Lord's welcome and acceptance of me."

If this is what the *Catechism* asks of us in relationship to people of other religions, how much more should we deal with friendship, kindness, generosity, and forbearance with our sisters and brothers in Christ? The virtue we must seek to cultivate is not the American virtue of tolerance, but the biblical virtue of humility. Humility is not the same as tolerance, for humility recognizes that a word of judgment may always be addressed to us. Humility is the stance that we, as those who are united in baptism to the death and resurrection of our Lord, must seek. We have a long way to go before we show the kind

of courageous love which Jesus demonstrated to the tax collectors and sinners as he welcomed them to his table. We forget the scandalous character of his act, as we forget the shameful character of his death on the cross, which he endured for us while we were yet sinners. There will be a profound irony and, indeed, shame if those of us who insist most vociferously that *Jesus is Lord* are also known to be characterized by a lack of humility and love.

But, as the *Catechism* states, we must also "meet error with truth." There is no formula—nor has there ever been a formula—for how one measures and mixes truth and forbearance. Paul's unflinching commitment and unfailing compassion remind us that we can never compromise on our zeal for truth—or for forbearance. This is neither an easy road to walk nor an easy witness to bear. But let us also be reminded that where the church fails to hold fast to its commitment to Christ as Lord, and therefore to hold and speak this truth in the humility of Christ himself, the loss is not only ours, or the church's, but also the world's.



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tial to the whole of the church.

The struggle for a balanced approach to *truth* and *community* has never been easy. Our temptation is to embrace one at the expense of the other. We are forced to wrestle with what we believe to be true, what we believe constitutes genuine Christian community, and what we experience in the real world. We have not been excused from the struggle. This is a tension into which we have been placed as part of what it means to be the *Church*.



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The virtue we must seek to cultivate is not the American virtue of tolerance, but the biblical virtue of humility.

The Reformation as a Living Tradition

BY JOHN L. THOMPSON

Anyone who seeks to be ordained in the Presbyterian Church (USA) must answer this question: "Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will you be instructed and led by those confessions as you lead the people of God?" Students at Fuller Seminary are not much different from quite a number of pastors and laity in our denomination. They would like to know just exactly what is it that you are receiving and adopting, when you say that you will sincerely receive and adopt these so-called *essential tenets*? As everyone knows, not only is there no list of these essential tenets in the *Book of Order*, the PCUSA General Assembly has refused overtures that have sought to clarify the *Book of Order* on this point.

Concern over essential tenets continues to surface in the discussions within our church, including some careful essays produced by our denomination's Office of Theology and Worship. The issue has arisen in other forums as well, most recently in an article by Jack Adams in *The Presbyterian Layman*. But one of the best contemporary accounts of essential tenets that I have ever read was published in *The Presbyterian Outlook* back in the late 1990s, in an exceedingly brief guest editorial. The writer, a Presbyterian pastor, argued quite incisively that the things that are truly essential in the Reformed tradition are, in fact, precisely those things which are most "catholic" rather than somehow exclusively Reformed. In other words, as important as Reformed themes or distinctives are to us, the essentials are by definition not at all the exclusive property of Presbyterians.

I liked that editorial very much, because it recognized that the Reformation was an attempt to reform the one church of Jesus Christ. The Reformation was not meant to be a schism. It was not meant to start a new denomination. It was not meant to come up with new ideas. Indeed, the most blistering and sarcastic barbs ever directed against John Calvin by a Roman Catholic opponent were when Cardinal Sadoletto described Calvin as one of those "new men . . . with scripture much in their mouths and hands." In the era of the Reformation, it was no virtue to be new or innova-

tive. The only virtue was to be faithful. But faithful to what?

Calvin on the Essentials

Late in the year 1543, Martin Bucer wrote to John Calvin, urging him to write a letter to Emperor Charles V in anticipation of a conference between Protestants and Catholics, to be held in the city of Speyer the following year. Calvin responded by writing a fairly long treatise that has come to be known in the English-speaking world as *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, not so much because that represents its exact title in Latin or French, but because that is overwhelmingly the theme of Calvin's essay. It is a treatise suffused with a timely ambiguity. It is ambiguous in that it is partly a defense of the Reformers, who had long since pressed ahead to institute reforms in whatever churches were liable to their influences; and yet it is also partly a plea for a continued dialogue, since it was the Protestant hope as they anticipated the upcoming Diet of Speyer that the emperor could be persuaded to bring Catholics and Protestants together in a truly "free, general council"—the sort of council for which Luther had been lobbying for over 20 years. But its ambiguity is also timely for us. This is how Calvin describes the church in his own day:

The Church lies in the greatest peril. An infinite number of souls, not knowing in what direction to turn, are miserably perplexed; . . . diverse sects arise; many whose impiety was formerly hidden, who take this dissension as a license to believe nothing at all; while many others . . . begin to part with their religious convictions. There is no discipline to check these evils. [Meanwhile,] among ourselves, who glory only in the name of Christ and have the same baptism, there is no more agreement than if we professed religions entirely different. And the most miserable thing of all is that there is . . . almost in sight a breaking up of the whole Church. If that should come to pass, it will be vain to look for a remedy.

Where Calvin can help us is especially in his recognition that there are criteria for differentiating one issue from another in the midst of the many issues that beset the church of his day. Clearly, Calvin felt that it was necessary to undertake the reform of the Christian church in his own day, but

with equal clarity he acknowledged that not every contested issue or perceived abuse carried the weight of necessity. In other words, some issues and some abuses touch upon the very essence of the church and of the Christian religion; other issues and other abuses may be important, but they do not carry the urgency of necessity.

For Calvin, the essence of the Christian religion consists in two things: first, in the due worship of God; and second, in "the source from which salvation is to be obtained." Calvin can call both of these items "doctrine," but he means much more than our mere propositional statements about God or about worship or salvation—he really means to argue that the first constitutive reality of the Christian faith is that we apprehend God and not merely our own idea of God; and the second constitutive reality, crucially informed by the first, is that we apprehend the God who saves us from a threat we could never conquer on our own and on terms that we can never dictate.

After these two items—worship and salvation—Calvin considers all else to be secondary. In this "secondary" category, he situates the sacraments and everything that pertains to the government or polity of the church. Speaking historically, these are some rather astonishing items! These are not theological small potatoes, and in Calvin's own day, there were huge controversies between Protestants and Catholics—and among Protestants themselves—over precisely such issues as the form and object of baptism, the form and significance and effect of the Lord's Supper, the authority of bishops versus congregations, the question of apostolic succession, and on and on. Calvin puts all these issues firmly in second place, because when the doctrines of worship and salvation are subverted, the church's sacraments and polity will be useless and ineffective, no matter how much they conform externally to Scripture.

Between the Necessary and the Indifferent

It is also the case, historically, that Calvin is here making a rather distinctive contribution to ecumenical discourse. One of the most consistent complaints of Protestant Reformers in the sixteenth century was that the Catholic Church of the day had stripped away Christian freedom by stipulating Christian obligations in great detail and by making these canon laws binding on the consciences of every Christian, so that one's salvation depended upon observing all of these regulations. In the 1520s, Luther once protested that people were more afraid of the consequences of eating butter during Lent than they were of committing fornication! So the Reformation was, among other things, an attempt to reclaim all of the Christian freedom that Scripture seemed to grant.

The initial distinction that was drawn here by many Reformers was a distinction between those beliefs and practices that are necessary or essential to the faith, and those matters that are nonessential or "indifferent." These *indifferent* matters were also known as *adiaphora* (the Greek word for "indifferent") or as "middle things," because they were neither morally good nor morally evil. In these matters, the conscience is utterly free, because Scripture has nothing to say either way. Nonetheless, this *indifferent* category was subject of to varying definitions. For some, a matter was understood to be indifferent or *adiaphora* if it was neither commanded nor prohibited by Scripture; for others, a matter was indifferent simply if it was indifferent to or not essential for salvation.

Calvin, too, has a concept and category of *adiaphora*, but such indifferent matters are not in view in this treatise. Instead, Calvin is working toward a further distinction, not between what is essential and what is *indifferent*, but between what is essential and what is *important*. There are many beliefs and practices that are important to the church, because they are found in Scripture. As I have noted, these include such significant matters as the sacraments and the form of church government. As *important* as these matters are, they do not bear on salvation, and so they are not classed among the "essentials." Let us now unpack some of what Calvin says about his two essentials—*worship* and *salvation*.

The Essence of Christianity: Worship

Calvin is wonderfully clear about what constitutes true worship of God. "Its chief foundation," as he says, is to acknowledge God to be exactly as God is, namely, "the only source of all virtue, justice, holiness, wisdom, truth, power, goodness, mercy, life, and salvation." Our duty, then, is to credit God for all that is good, to seek all that is good in God alone, and in our every need to turn to God alone. Everything else—including ceremonies, liturgy, and all the busyness of worship—is subservient, at best an aid, an external means whereby our bodies can participate in worship along with our hearts. If the Reformed faith is a living tradition, this is an impulse that ought to be alive and thriving, and our congregations ought to know it. In a word, God ought to be the center of our worship, not our own entertainment. Calvin draws a stark contrast here between our own pleasure, even our own seemingly zealous pleasure, and the sovereignty of the divine commands that are expressed in the Word of God. As is well-known, Calvin was deeply suspicious of innovation, of filling the time set aside for divine worship with human devices, theatrical shows, inventions, and superstitions.

For Calvin, the essence of the Christian religion consists in two things: first, in the due worship of God; and second, in "the source from which salvation is to be obtained."

The Reformation was not meant to be a schism. It was not meant to start a new denomination.

In principle, it is very hard to believe that Calvin could fault any church for renewing its commitment to those tenets that Calvin would see as essential to the well-being of any church.

The Essence of Christianity: Salvation in Christ

Calvin identifies a second essential ingredient as “the knowledge of our salvation,” or as the “knowledge of the source from which salvation is to be obtained.” But he quickly explains that there are three stages of this knowledge: First comes a conviction of one’s utter depravity and sinfulness, coupled with an awareness of God’s rightful judgment. These desperate straits are relieved only in the second stage, when the sinner is made to live anew by the knowledge of Christ, and Calvin is careful to insist that a sinner’s knowledge of Christ will necessarily include a confession of Christ as the only source of salvation. In other words, those who have truly been humbled by sin will never dream that they have somehow contributed to their own salvation. Finally, from this initial knowledge of salvation by the grace of Christ alone, one grows into a kind of Christian maturity, having learned to rest in Christ with confidence.

Clearly, Calvin has a rich understanding of worship and salvation. Worship looks not only to the purity of our intentions and actions, but also to the sovereignty of God and the preeminent place to be given to the Word of God. Salvation looks not only to the eternal well-being of human beings, but also to an acute and necessary awareness of sin and to the exclusive agency of Jesus Christ as our deliverer and redeemer, our expiation and righteousness. Calvin’s treatise provides a sophisticated framework for discerning essential tenets, as well as for how our practices are shaped by our belief in divine sovereignty, the authority of Scripture, human depravity and helplessness, and the sufficiency of Christ as Lord and Savior.

Justification as a Catholic Doctrine

There are other remarkable insights offered by Calvin’s treatise, but two in particular deserve special notice. One is a passing remark about the doctrine of justification by grace alone, which Calvin was certainly not interested in defending as if it were a “Calvinist” invention. The Scriptures offer clear proof, he writes, of what he calls “our” doctrine, but Calvin immediately goes on to say that this doctrine “ought to be called not ours, but rather that of the Church catholic.” The reason Calvin cares so much about this doctrine is not because it is an essential tenet of the Reformed tradition, but because it is an essential tenet of the Christian faith. In other words, while Calvin might admit that there are certainly Reformed distinctives, the only doctrines and practices that can be dignified by calling them truly “essential” are those that are essential to the church and to the faith that is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.

Why We Can’t Wait

The last of Calvin’s insights arises much later in his treatise. There, in the final section, Calvin frames a defense for why the Protestant Reformers could not wait for a “free, general council” to meet before they began to preach a purer gospel and to bring reform to the corrupted practices and teachings of the church of their day. You can probably guess his logic at this point. If indeed there are certain aspects of the Christian religion that are essential and necessary to its very identity and existence, then the very life of Christianity itself necessitates that these aspects be proclaimed and put into practice. Calvin’s defense of the Protestant reforming activities that began long before him, with Luther, is ecumenically shrewd. On the one hand, Calvin lives quite consciously under the sovereignty of God: “It is not ours to govern events,” as he says, and “neither is it ours to prevent them.” Indeed, “the restoration of the church is the work of God.” It depends neither on our hopes nor our opinions, and we must therefore press on regardless of whether we are filled with hope or despair. It is always “the will of our master that [the] gospel be preached,” says Calvin, regardless of outcome or expectation, support or opposition. On the other hand, Calvin also wants to insist that simply because he and his colleagues were willing to dissent from their Catholic counterparts, that should not be regarded by anyone as schism. The conversation continues, as Calvin’s own apologetic treatise demonstrates.

Calvin thus styles himself as a Reformer of the Catholic Church, by necessity to proclaim the gospel and reform the church, living in a dissent that he does not wish to construe as schism or as the final break that he clearly dreads. It is difficult not to see an analogy here, between Calvin’s strategically self-styled image and the role that has been played of late in the PCUSA by the Confessing Church movement. Of course, not every so-called Confessing Church is by definition pure in heart and without its own political agenda. But, in principle, it is very hard to believe that Calvin could fault any church for renewing its commitment to those tenets that Calvin would see as essential to the being and well-being of any church, Protestant or Catholic.

With respect to the Reformation as a living tradition and the question of what is alive and what should be kept alive and what, in the final analysis, brings us life, I have tried to draw some important lessons from Calvin’s treatise *On the Necessity of Reforming the Church*. Let me suggest five theses.

1. *Worship matters.* Or, more precisely, worship matters because God matters. Worship is the expression of our loyalty to our maker and our redeemer. It is our highest duty, and it pervades our every

fiber. We do well to take worship seriously, and to ask ourselves if our worship reflects and communicates the God of the Scriptures. To this end, we should worry less about the entertainment value of our services and more about what is being proclaimed. To this end, we should worry lest our parishioners leave a service emotionally warmed yet theologically unformed. An informed understanding of the God whom we worship is a hallmark of the Reformed tradition.

2. *Salvation matters.* Or, more precisely, sin matters. I know that people say that they find the church’s obsession with sin to be depressing, and it strikes me that we have not modeled the beauty of the church’s confession of sin very well. For me, there is nothing more important on a Sunday than to hear the call to confession as a call from outside of myself, and to receive the absolution in the name of Jesus Christ. Not a week goes by but that I run smack into my own total depravity and moral failure. Thanks be to God, this need makes me to be precisely the sort of person that Jesus came to save, and I know he welcomes me.

3. *If sin matters, Jesus Christ matters more.* To know oneself as a sinner, totally depraved, totally “grown in upon oneself” as Calvin would put it, is a good thing. But to know oneself as a sinner for whom Christ died is a still greater thing. I very much like the insight that is conveyed by the title of Neil Plantinga’s book about sin from a few years back, *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be*. We Presbyterians have spent a good deal of the past 20 years worrying a lot about sin, and about sexual sin in particular. This is an important worry, but it needs to be kept in perspective. When we look at sin in general or at any specific sin, what we see is something that’s not the way it’s supposed to be. When we look at the world around us, we see a world that is not the way it was supposed to be. When we look at ourselves, we see people who are not the way they were supposed to be.

Sin, moreover, is not something that we find only in other people, and it is never an occasion for smugness. On the contrary, the sin we see around us is an occasion to express our solidarity with all those who have taken refuge at the foot of the cross. That includes sinners whose sins we like, because their sins are like our sins, but also those whose brokenness may be harder for us to imagine. Herein lies yet another essential tenet, and a living inheritance of the Reformation: Sin does matter. But what we receive from Jesus Christ matters more.

4. *These essentials of the faith must be proclaimed.* These are the things that are essential. They pertain to our very being, not just our well-being. These are the things that constitute the good news that has set us free and rescued us from the pit. They must be faithfully held and diligently pro-

claimed. And they cannot wait.

5. *Finally, important matters should not divide the church.* For Calvin, the essential tenets of the Reformed tradition make it live. But between these essentials of the faith and those many matters that are truly indifferent, where freedom of conscience reigns, there is a middle category. This is the category of the *important*. Important matters are truly important! They are too important not to work at, too important to ignore, too important not to care deeply about. But they are not so essential to the faith or to the salvation of the lost that they should be allowed to split a church, or the church!

Calvin’s insistence on this in-between category can help us in our own self-examination, lest we fall into the prideful trap of assuming that Christianity always reinforces our own personal tastes. Calvin also furnishes us with a category for thinking through some of the issues that have beset us for decades. We need to resist regarding essential tenets as if they were merely important or indifferent, but we also must resist escalating important issues into essential tenets. Here is where committed conversation and bearing with one another,¹ despite our passionate disagreements, is to be cultivated as a mark of Christian character and as a fruit of the Spirit. At the very least, Calvin’s distinction ought to be considered in our endless debates over human sexuality. In what way does this particular issue implicate matters that are essential or indifferent—or, perhaps, involve issues that are better understood as lying somewhere between these two extremes?

“The restoration of the church is the work of God.” At the end of the day, it is only God and our Savior who is our essential tenet—not because we hold to him, but because he holds us. That, I would submit, is how the catholic truth of the Reformation lives and must live in our tradition today.

ENDNOTE

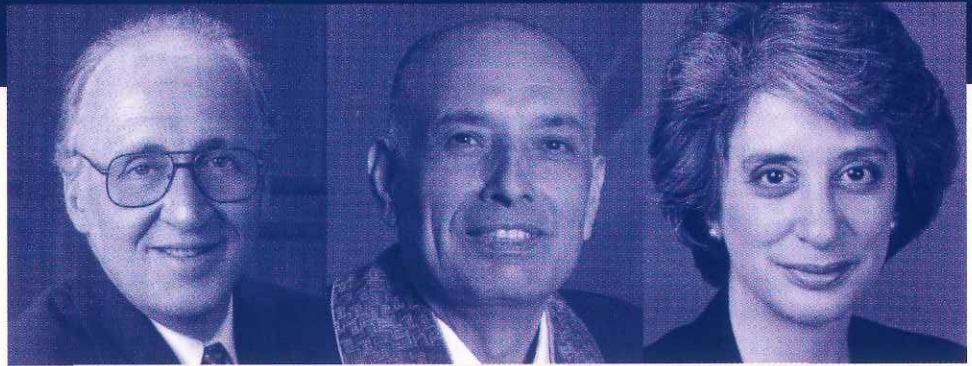
1. See the essays by Joseph D. Small, “Committed Conversation” (Office of Theology and Worship Church Issues Series 2; Louisville, Ky.: Presbyterian Distribution Service, 1999); and Sheldon W. Sorge, “Bearing with One Another: The Pastoral Task in Times of Struggle” (Office of Theology and Worship Church Issues Series 5; Louisville, Ky.: Presbyterian Distribution Service, 2002).



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