

“Concerning Same Sex Marriage”

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Text: John 17: 13 - 24

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A 17th century theologian coined a phrase about church unity that was later picked up and promoted by John Wesley: “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.” It is a lovely and straightforward description of how Christians should be with one another when it comes to our individual Christian beliefs. There should be essentials that bind us together (like the Doctrine of the Trinity). On lesser issues it makes sense to have freedom of conscience. I especially appreciate the last phrase: “in all things, charity”: whether essential or non-essential. “Charity” is not only a word for generosity, it is also a King James Bible word for love. This saying encourages us to express love and to have a generosity of spirit with another who does not believe what we believe. Also, when it says “in all things charity” the phrase alludes to a need for humility: for in any belief there is the possibility that we can be wrong. Now, we can read this encouragement and think “this is easy to apply”, but it becomes challenging when there is a disagreement regarding what the Church should consider as essential.

This framework has been the place of debate for our denomination regarding same-sex marriage over the past several years. Over that time two clear distinct positions developed and the two groups dug in. It became an “either-or” proposition for us: either we maintain the traditional definition of marriage or we widen the definition to include same-sex unions. But hiding behind these two positions was an unasked question: “is this matter an essential of faith?”

Our Statement of Christian Belief—Living Faith—affirms the following as what The Presbyterian Church in Canada stands for: “The Bible has been given to us by the inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life. It is the standard of all doctrine by which we must test any word that comes to us...We subject to its judgment all we believe and do” (5.1). Both sides in the debate affirm this statement and believe it to be vital. This is an “essential.” But then, a little further down in that same statement we read, “The writing of the Bible was conditioned by the language, thought, and setting of its time. The Bible must be read in its historical context. We interpret Scripture as we compare passages, seeing the two Testaments in light of each other, and listening to commentators past and present” (5.4). It is on this point that we see the divergence of these two groups. Conservative Presbyterians are not as influenced by the idea that scripture was “conditioned by the language, thought, and setting of its time.” For them the authority of scripture is more timeless. So when Jesus reaffirmed the nature of marriage found in Genesis—saying, “For this reason, a man will leave his father and his mother and will live with his wife. The two will become one.” (Matthew 19:5-6)—for Conservatives that is a directive that still applies today. It is timeless. Additionally, in the entirety of the Bible there are 7 brief passages that speak negatively about homosexual relationships. So again, for Conservatives these passages show how we

should not live. What the Conservatives believe is consistent with our understanding of the authority of scripture.

But the position of the Progressive Christians within our denomination is also completely consistent with our understanding of the authority of scripture. They too affirm what Living Faith says, ““The Bible has been given to us by the inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life.” But this is not all that Living Faith says. It also states, “The writing of the Bible was conditioned by the language, thought, and setting of its time. The Bible must be read in its historical context.” The Progressives of our denomination lean more into this affirmation. Consequently, they see those few Biblical prohibitions concerning homosexuality as “conditioned by the language, thought and setting of its time.” They point to how the early Church shifted significantly to welcome Gentiles into Christian faith communities (which were originally all Jewish). They point to how we set aside the Biblically-accepted practice of slavery and set aside the New Testament prohibitions that women could never have authority over men. As well for Progressives, the New Testament priority for love is considered not only an essential of faith, but also a fundamental starting point for understanding everything in the Christian faith. For them, this priority to love others means we must love and include those who are not heterosexual. So, what the Progressives believe is consistent with our understanding of the authority of scripture.

You can see the problem. So this leaves our denomination divided into two distinct groups, who both whole-heartedly agree with our doctrine about the importance of the Bible in guiding our lives. But despite this shared starting point, sincere faithful Presbyterians land in two positions on the question, “Do we open the definition of marriage to include same sex couples?” At General Assembly this year the goal was to settle the question by either answering “yes” or “no”. To simplify the results for you, 58% (the majority) of the Assembly was in favour of changing our definition of marriage to being between “two adults” and 42% of the Assembly wanted the definition to remain as being between “a man and a woman.” Many commissioners were surprised by how close the vote count really was. All the commissioners who came from Korean congregations left the meeting. In response the Assembly made time on Wednesday night for commissioners to share how they felt. You may have watched that on YouTube. My heart went out to those who felt alienated by the decision. I was disappointed by those who spoke in angry or exclusivist terms because they were not expressing: “and in all things charity.” And I grew in concern about how dramatic the rupture could be in our denomination that could mimic the disruption we had in 1925 when 25% of The PCC chose not to enter the new United Church of Canada.

The next day something quite unexpected happened. The Assembly decided that the future of our denomination will not depend on an either/or choice on the definition of marriage (and this was after years of debating this issue on the assumption that it had to be either/or). Instead they adopted the following: “That The Presbyterian Church in Canada holds two parallel definitions of marriage and

recognizes that faithful, Holy Spirit-filled, Christ-centred, God honouring people can understand marriage as a covenant relationship between a man and a woman or as a covenant relationship between two adult persons.” In other words, the Assembly acknowledged that Presbyterians sharing the same view of the authority of scripture can come to different conclusions on the definition of marriage that are faithful and sincere. But the Assembly said two things that I think were more important. First, we said that the definition of marriage is not an essential, requiring unity. Second, the Assembly said unity was more important than one’s camp being declared as “right” on this issue.

Unity. Jesus was very concerned about unity among his followers. The Last Supper was Jesus’ last time before his death to provide teaching and encouragement. That time ended with Jesus praying. And what did he pray for? That his followers be one. In 12 verses of that prayer Jesus asked the same thing of the Father four times: that they be one. Why? Well first, Jesus was aware that he was leaving them behind, on their own. Up to now he was their shepherd, guide, he kept it all together for them. So he prayed, “Now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world and I am coming to you. Father, protect them...that they may be one” (17:11). Without his physical presence Jesus was concerned that his followers in time would not be one...and 2,000 years of church history has proven that this has been all too true. Jesus had another concern prompting this prayer. We read, “I am asking this not just on behalf of my followers here right now, but also on behalf of those who will become followers later because of the witness of these first followers, that they may ALL be one.” Differences in belief and practice can emerge as the faith is passed from one generation to the next and to the next...and 2,000 years of church history has proven that this has been all too true.

But why was it important to be one? In verse 22 we hear that our unity shows forth the glory of Christ...shows it before the world. And that gives credibility to our witness to Christ in the world. This idea was so important that we find it twice in this prayer! First in verse 21: “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be one with us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” Then again in verse 23: “that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” In other words, that in our unity, the world might see that God has loved us. While these ideas were never presented in the form of a motion at General Assembly, still by declaring that we can hold two different definitions of marriage as concurrently faithful the Assembly was demonstrating that “being one” was an essential of faith.

Personally, I am pleased the Assembly made the decision it did. First, because I believe The Presbyterian Church needs an inclusive definition of marriage. But I’m even happier that we have found a way forward that suggests unity is an essential of faith and that one’s definition of marriage is a non-essential of faith. I see this last idea as more important given what I believe the

future holds for the Church in Canada. I think it's clear that over the coming generations we will see Canada become more and more secular, the church become more diminished in both size and influence. But while we are pushed more and more to the sidelines God's mission in the world will not change. We will still need to show forth the glory of Jesus Christ. We will still need to demonstrate through our words and deeds that God loves the world. As the Canadian Church becomes diminished in size and influence we will have to link arms—more and more—with our brothers and sisters in other denominations. Increased ecumenical companionship and collaboration is going to be needed. And to do that we are going to have to look past our differences. I am confidently hopeful that this will happen, because it is already happening now and the trajectory is for greater cooperation. And, I am confidently hopeful because ten days ago our General Assembly said to the world that it is more important for Christians to band and work together than it is to become further fractured by what we disagree over.

So where from here? The Presbyterian Church has to approve the two implications of this decision: that our ministers can conduct same sex marriages and that “congregations and presbyteries may call and ordain as ministers and elect and ordain as ruling elders LGBTQI persons (married or single)”. If a majority of presbyteries approves them this winter and if next year's General Assembly approves it next summer then it will become our doctrine and practice. That being said, clergy, elders and congregations will have “liberty of conscience” regarding which definition of marriage they will affirm. “In non-essentials, liberty.” As I read it, this means we as a congregation need to decide which definition of marriage will govern our life. So while we have had many conversations on this issue over the years, like the Assembly we too need one final decisive one. My hope is, like the Assembly, we can find our own way forward giving priority to Jesus' desire that we be one.