

A RESPONSE TO “*ON THE QUESTION OF UNITY AND DIVERSITY*”

From Gale Presbyterian Church, Elmira Ontario

November 2018.

The 2018 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada introduced the document “*On the question of unity and diversity*” and requested responses to the document from congregations and institutions of the denomination. The document examines issues around the inclusion of LGBTQI individuals in our denominational structures. This is the reply of Gale Presbyterian Church, Elmira, Ontario.

As much as Jesus urged his disciples to seek peace and unity (Mt. 18:21, 22) and prayed that they might stay united after his death (Jn. 17:11), unity was a major challenge for the early church. One of the greatest disagreements was over the inclusion of the Gentiles – a dispute between those who felt that new converts to the way of Christ should follow the laws of the Old Testament and those who felt the law no longer applied. (Acts 15:1-11) Paul addresses this debate in his letter to the Romans, arguing that the grace of God experienced in Jesus Christ was sufficient for salvation. (Ro. 4: 1 3-25) This marked a radical departure from laws that, up until that point, were the bedrock of faith in God: including circumcision and dietary restrictions.

The church has a history of violent attempts to preserve unity in a changing world.

Between 313 CE, when Constantine stopped the persecution of Christians, and 380 CE, when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, numerous ecumenical councils met to define the essentials of the faith. The Council of Nicaea in 325 CE was a notable meeting. It produced the Nicene Creed, which was amended in 381 CE. That still failed to settle the question of essential tenets to unify the church. This quest for unity was not simply an intellectual exercise. Some of the opposition was violent and brutal. It would not be the last time church leaders used force to silence dissent and create a form of unity.

The Presbyterian Church in Canada as we know it is the union in 1875 CE of several smaller groups of Presbyterian churches. Then, after much deliberation the union of many churches created the United Church of Canada. The dramatic story of the vote for union in the 1925 General Assembly and the resistance of 79 commissioners and their supporters is well known. Families were divided. Lawsuits proliferated. Congregations split; very few went into union or stayed out as a collective. It was individuals and families who ultimately made the choice of who stayed in a congregation and who left. Since then the Presbyterian Church in Canada has diversified with many individuals joining us from Europe, Asia and Africa. Many people in the church will have little or no “race-memory” of the divisive time following 1925. Individuals within a congregation today have different understandings of the issues surrounding human sexuality and the doctrines surrounding marriage. Congregations are made up of these individuals. We are dealing with hard issues that are complex and emotional.

The Presbyterian Church in Canada embraces the spirit of a slogan from the 16th century debates on reformation: “in essential things unity, in non-essential things freedom, and in all things charity”. The church has struggled through and survived many divisive controversies such as alcohol use, organs in the sanctuary and the ordination of women. Our denomination has not formally listed what things are essential. Are issues of human sexuality an essential thing? The question of the full inclusion of LGBTQI persons in the life of The Presbyterian Church in Canada poses unique stresses on the covenant that binds our congregations together. Is this an essential thing needing unity, or a non-essential thing with the freedom to disagree? The different answers to the question of LGBTQI welcome and inclusion stem from different commitments growing out of profoundly different ways of looking at the world. Questions of marriage equality and ordination to church office bring issues into very visible practice, and the deep division is very visible. Can we be a church with such diversity of opinion?

A middle-of-the-road approach may be considered, supported by an understanding of Romans 14:1-13 as permission to recommend a dual or two-prong path, in the interest of avoiding rupture of the denomination. This would propose that our denomination allow for a local response to the question of inclusion. If a congregation were in favour of inclusion it would be allowed. But any congregation could remain closed if that is their will.

A consideration of Romans 14 must begin with a consideration of its place in the context of Romans. Romans has an opening theological discussion followed by a discussion of how that theology should change the way Christians live. In chapters 12-15 of Romans, Paul addresses how to live as a believer. Leading up to chapter 14, Paul reminds his readers we are all one body in Christ (Ro. 12:5) and we are to welcome and bless everyone, including those who might hurt us (Ro. 12:13-14). We engage in all our relationships with respect and love (Ro. 13:3, 10). We are to lay aside all self-indulgent behaviour so that we might put on Christ (Ro. 13:13-14). He points out all these commands are the way we love our neighbours as ourselves (Ro. 13:9). What does it look like to put on Christ and to be one body? It means not judging one another. From the beginning of his letter (Ro. 2:1), Paul has been urging the Roman members to stop judging. In chapter 14 he makes clear that even if we have different beliefs on important issues, we are not to judge those with whom we disagree (Ro. 14:10). We need to respect that we are each committed to Christ and ultimately accountable to only God (Ro. 14:7-12). Romans 14 begins with a call to “welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions” (Ro. 14:1). Whatever our debate or disagreements, we are called to pursue peace (Ro. 14:19), build up each other (Ro. 15:2) and live in harmony (Ro. 15:5). Romans 14 affirms some disagreements between Christians need to be resolved by agreeing to disagree and giving up the effort to decide who is right or wrong. What does this mean for unity in the church today? It is a reminder that whenever the church is divided on an issue, we must love those on the opposing side. Those of us who think we are right, which is naturally everyone, must place the spiritual well-being of our opponent as our primary concern. Our theological righteousness is meaningless if we are unable to demonstrate love for our neighbour. Paul does not say that we should compromise our theology (Ro. 14:16), but our actions need to demonstrate compassion and Christ’s love.

Without a doubt, this discussion of our time poses a conundrum. We know the full inclusion of all people into our community will challenge many people’s understanding of faith and religion while affirming others. For certain the denomination’s decision, for or against inclusion, will be divisive. In considering Romans 14 we believe our motivations for our actions are the basis of our salvation. Do we act (or fail to act) out of a fear of what an action will do for our denomination? Do we act (or fail to act) out of a sincere belief that our actions are the right thing to do?

Gale Presbyterian Church believes Christ calls everyone and that no one should be excluded from full participation in the blessings of Christ as presented by the Presbyterian Church in Canada. This is the right thing to do. The fear of division of the church is secondary to the imperative to do the right thing.

Therefore:

Recommendation 1: That Gale Presbyterian Church, Elmira will welcome all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, to participate fully as members of our congregation including the right to be ordained to office and married in our church.

Recommendation 2: That we acknowledge not all members of the Presbyterian Church in Canada will be comfortable with such a decision and may decide to leave the denomination. If this happens, we will show those who choose to leave love and respect for their choice.

Recommendation 3: That this be the response of Gale Presbyterian Church to the General Assembly concerning the document “On the Question of Unity and Diversity.”