

ON THE QUESTION OF UNITY AND DIVERSITY

(A&P 2018, p. 237-48, 36)

Introduction

Jesus prayed for his disciples, “The glory that you have given me I have given them, so 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.” (John 17:22–23) The Apostle Paul echoed that prayer in his letter to the Romans: “May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Romans 15:5–6) This fulfills God’s promise given through Jeremiah, “They shall be my people, and I will be their God. I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me for all time, for their own good and the good of their children after them.” (Jeremiah 32:38–39)

What does the “unity of the church” mean? There are at least three distinct meanings for the phrase. There is the unity of the holy catholic church; there is the unity of The Presbyterian Church in Canada; and there is the unity of an individual congregation. Each is important in our present debate.

The section of John Calvin’s *Institutes* dealing with the Christian life begins with a chapter entitled “The True Church, With Which As the Mother of All the Godly We Must Keep Unity”. Calvin notes God gathers God’s children to the church “not only that they may be nourished by her help and ministry as long as they are infants and children, but also that they may be guided by her motherly care until they mature and at last reach the goal of faith.” Calvin adds God has arranged things so that “for those to whom [God] is Father the church may also be Mother”. (*Institutes*, 4.1.1, Battles translation).

Further, Calvin argued, apart from the church “one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation, as Isaiah (Isaiah 37:32) and Joel (Joel 2:32) testify. Ezekiel agrees with them when he declares that those whom God rejects from heavenly life will not be enrolled among God’s people. (Ezekiel 13:9) On the other hand, those who turn to the cultivation of true godliness are said to inscribe their names among the citizens of Jerusalem. (cf. Isaiah 56:5; Psalm 87:6) For this reason, it is said in another Psalm: “Remember me, O Jehovah, with favour toward thy people; visit me with salvation: that I may see the well-doing of thy chosen ones, that I may rejoice in the joy of thy nation, that I may be glad with thine inheritance.” (Psalm 106:4–5; cf. Psalm 105:4, Vg., etc.) By these words God’s fatherly favour and the especial witness of spiritual life are limited to his flock, so that it is always disastrous to leave the church. (*Institutes*, 4.1.4)

In this sense, Calvin agrees with Cyprian: “No one can have God as Father who does not have the church as Mother.” The Westminster Confession of Faith, one of the Presbyterian Church’s historic subordinate standards, builds on this, calling the “visible church, which is also Catholic or universal under the gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law) . . . the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.”

This gives Reformed Christians a strong commitment to unity in the visible church. Even though the “purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated, as to become no churches of Christ . . .” somewhere there is one that does deserve our allegiance and membership: “Nevertheless, there shall be always a church on earth to worship God according to His will.” (Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter XXV)

Living Faith is clear about the church’s unity: “The church is one. It is one family under God whose purpose it is to unite all people in Jesus Christ.” (Living Faith 7.1.2) The 2004 study resource *A Catechism for Today* declares “the church is essential to Christian belief and practice. The church is holy in that it is set apart by God to be a chosen people in the world. The church is catholic in that it is universal, including all people of all time who affirm the Christian faith. To belong to a congregation is to belong to the holy catholic church.” (Question 68)

This has echoes of the historic Reformed standard The Second Helvetic Confession which describes the importance of the church this way, “but we esteem fellowship with the true church of Christ so highly that we deny that those can live before God who do not stand in fellowship with the true church of God, but separate themselves from it. For as there was no salvation outside Noah’s ark when the world perished in flood; so we believe that there is no certain salvation outside Christ, who offers himself to be enjoyed by the elect in the church; and hence we teach that those who wish to live ought not to be separated from the true church of Christ.” (The Second Helvetic Confession, Chapter XVII)

The Church and Unity in the Bible

The New Testament talks about the church in two ways. On the one hand, church describes the universal body of Christ. Summarizing passages on this aspect of the church, the Westminster Confession of Faith says this universal body “is invisible [and] consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof.” (Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter XXV) This unity of this church is described in, for example, Ephesians 4: “There is one body and one spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all,” (Ephesians 4:4–6)

On the other hand, church also describes the particular gathering or congregation of believers in a specific place. Disruptions of these local communities is the focus of passages like Paul’s rebuke to the Christians in Corinth: “For as long as there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations?”. (1 Corinthians 3:3) Defending the unity of the church in this sense involves calling people to work together in harmony, as Paul taught the Philippians: “Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world.” (Philippians 2:14–15)

As much as Jesus urged his disciples to seek peace and unity (Matthew 18:21–22) and prayed that they might stay united after his death (John 17:11), unity was to be a major challenge for the early church. One of the greatest disagreements was over the inclusion of the Gentiles. It was 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. (Romans 4:13–25) This was a radical position for it marked a departure away from laws that, up until that point, were the bedrock of faith in God: including circumcision and dietary restrictions.

Defending the unity of the church universal involves remembering God “has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.” (Ephesians 1:9–10) In this global intention, God is gathering into the eternal city “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.” (Revelation 7:9) Growing in this unity means mutually remembering, as, for example, the Ephesians were urged to remember, “the way you learned Christ! For surely you have heard about him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus. You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” (Ephesians 4:20–24)

The New Testament shows evidence of particular congregations working together to care for each other in God’s grace. For example, Paul took up a collection from the churches in Asia minor to care for the suffering Christians in Jerusalem. He was able to do this because the church at Antioch commissioned him and Barnabas as missionaries to plant and strengthen churches through the region.

A History of Unity

The apostolic church struggled to agree on the essential tenets of Christianity. The first attempts were called “Rules of Faith” and Irenaeus and Tertullian cited a very early one, the Roman symbol, in their letters in the 2nd century. The earliest surviving text of this simple statement dates from 340:

I believe in God the Father almighty;
and in Christ Jesus His only Son, our Lord,
Who was born from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary,
Who under Pontius Pilate was crucified and buried,
on the third day rose again from the dead,
ascended to heaven, sits at the right hand of the Father,
whence He will come to judge the living and the dead;
and in the Holy Spirit, the holy Church,
the remission of sins, the resurrection of the flesh, the life everlasting.

Between 313, when Constantine stopped the persecution of Christians, and 380, when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, emperors called ecumenical councils to define more fully the essentials of the faith. Constantine himself convened the First Council of Nicaea in 325. They produced the Nicene Creed, which the First Council of Constantinople amended in 381. 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 to false doctrines was violent and brutal. It would not be the last time church leaders used force to silence dissent and create a form of unity.

Some at these councils were troubled by the “filioque” clause in the section of the Nicene Creed discussing the Holy Spirit.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified...

They believed that the Spirit, like the Son, proceeded only from the Father. This is still an important division between contemporary Christians in the eastern and western traditions. The simpler Apostles Creed, based on the Roman symbol, came into use after the council in Milan in 389. It simply says “I believe in the Holy Spirit” and was something both east and west could affirm.

As the church planted deeper roots in distinct cultures, organizational unity between congregations who had different attitudes, languages, habits and so on became more and more difficult. Eventually, the Great Schism of 1054 cemented the division between the Latin and Greek churches. The Orthodox tradition splintered into eastern and oriental traditions. In the west, the Catholic tradition fractured during the Protestant Reformation into national churches like the Church of England, into theologically-oriented churches like the Anabaptist movements, and into churches characterized by both like the Dutch Reformed Church. What does the unity of the church mean with regard to these bodies?

The Presbyterian Church in Canada’s History

The Presbyterian Church in Canada today is the continuing presence of a tradition central to early Canada. The largest group in that tradition was Presbyterians from Scotland who served in the British army or were traders and settlers. These people belonged to synods connected to churches in Scotland created by divisions in the 16th and 17th centuries. There were also some Irish Presbyterians connected with those same synods in Scotland, French Huguenots and Presbyterians from the United States, some of whom came north after the American Revolution and some of whom were Dutch Reformed from New York.

In the second half of the 19th century, the first ecumenical movement within the Protestant churches in North America began to bring various related denominations into larger groups. In 1861, the merger of the Canadian synods of the Free Church of Scotland and the United Presbyterian Church formed the Canada Presbyterian Church. In 1867, the groups in the Maritimes associated with the Church of Scotland merged to become the

Synod of the Presbyterian Church of the Maritime Provinces of British North America. In 1875, these two bodies and the Presbyterian Church of Canada formed The Presbyterian Church in Canada. For 50 years this new denomination grew and developed with an active overseas mission program.

But uniting groups of the same tradition was not the only concern of the ecumenical movement. Discussions grew about the possibility of uniting all Canadian Protestants as the new territories were being developed. The Presbyterians, Methodists, Congregationalists, Anglicans and Baptists were all part of that discussion. A plan was put to a vote in the Methodist, Congregationalist and Presbyterian churches in late 1924 and into 1925. 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. Those who resisted union were divided between the descendants of the Church of Scotland and of the Free Church of Scotland traditions. These two groups have lived together for almost a century, creating a denomination for which theology is important but sometimes divisive.

Between 1925 and 1939, the new United Church of Canada and the “Continuing Presbyterians” were in constant and widespread battles over the politics of the division, the theology of the division and the property both of the old Presbyterian Church and the individual congregations who were allowed to vote whether to take their congregation into union or not. Families were divided.

In the centres of Canadian cities, churches that had once been Methodist and some that were Presbyterian became united while the dissenting remnants of Presbyterian churches had to find buildings to buy or rent or build new. Lawsuits proliferated. Finally, in 1939, many of the property issues, and even the name of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, were settled by an act of Parliament. However, the effects of the church union issue continue.

New ministers for the continuing Presbyterian churches were recruited from Scotland and Ireland. After the war, The Presbyterian Church in Canada grew and (to some extent) diversified with immigration from Britain and Holland and then, after the 1956 rising, from Hungary. More recently, immigration from countries where missionaries were active has added to the cultural diversity of the denomination. This diversity and the 78 years that have passed since the chaos of church union has dimmed the sense of loss from the years after church union. Still, for many the issue of possible schism raises unhappy emotional memories of their own (or their parents’) past.

At church union, 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. Individuals within a congregation today will have different understandings of the issues surrounding human sexuality and the doctrines surrounding marriage. They will also have different understandings about leaving the denomination especially if it means leaving behind a building that they have helped build or care for. Congregations are made up of these individuals. We are dealing with hard issues that are complex and emotional.

Denominations and Unity

Denominations are historical and sociological realities. They are ways for congregations sharing a common heritage – perhaps ethnic, perhaps theological, and perhaps both – to work together in common mission projects. The denomination’s unity and usefulness grows out of the way member congregations can pool resources and work together in peace and harmony to accomplish a shared vision of Christ’s call.

The family of Christian churches is united in the common faith expressed in shared standards like the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds. Denominations within that family are distinguished by different attitudes about issues like church government, doctrinal development, or sacramental practice. Part of what distinguishes different traditions is their sense of where the essential unity of the church lies. The Roman Catholic tradition, for example, can embrace a broad range of theological diversity because their essential unity is in the regular apostolic succession of ordinations and submission to the leadership of the Pope and the teaching authority of the Magisterium. While some Anglican congregations find doctrinal consensus in the 39 Articles of Religion from the 1604 English prayer book, the shared commitment to the worship life outlined in that book and its successors has been a more broadly accepted standard of unity in the Anglican communion.

As noted in the Committee on Church Doctrine report in 2016, “A Study of Presbyterian Polity”, Presbyterian and Reformed denominations have been distinguished by an emphasis “on the supreme authority of scripture (‘the only rule of faith and life’), the importance of a defined theological confession (‘This we believe...’), the collegiality and plurality of shared oversight and mutual accountability (‘elders’, plural in each congregation and equal numbers of ministers and elders in the presbytery and higher courts), and an orderly record (regularly ‘attested’ which has ensured a long and retentive corporate memory).” (A&P 2016, p. 252) The contemporary standard Living Faith illustrates this Reformed tradition when it affirms, “the church is present when the Word is truly preached, the sacraments rightly administered, and as it orders its life according to the word of God.” (Living Faith 7.1.6)

This means Reformed and Presbyterian congregations have tended to find unity in a shared commitment to “defined theological confessions”. Whether it is the Swiss Second Helvetic Confession, the Dutch Belgic Confession, the French Gallican Confession, the German Heidelberg Catechism, or our own Westminster Confession from the British Isles, Reformed Christians gathered in denominations marked by a shared confession. The Presbyterian Church in Canada has continued this tradition of expressing unity in a common confession by developing The Declaration Concerning Church and Nation and the contemporary standard Living Faith to stand beside the Westminster Confession. While the exact phrasing of these confessions has varied over time and in different places, some themes are common across the tradition.

“Confessing the Faith Today”, a Committee on Church Doctrine paper the General Assembly commended to the church in 2003, noted this work of confession “is a continuing and never a completed task... The second paragraph of the Preamble to the Ordination Questions makes this clear when after speaking of the subordinate standards, it adds: ‘and such doctrine as the church in obedience to scripture and under the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit, may yet confess in the church’s continuing task of reformulating the faith.’ This open-ended assertion, to be sure, assumes that all such reformulation is subject to the Barrier Act procedure that requires the approval of all new doctrinal formulations by the presbyteries and by two General Assemblies of the church.”

Recognizing the Presbyterian Church is “a reformed church, always reforming”, Confessing the Faith Today continues, “Reformation is a never-ending task. It is not change for the sake of change. Rather, it is reformation and renewal in obedience to God’s word under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, or, as the other phrase of the formula, often omitted, puts it, *secundum verbum Dei*, that is, ‘according to the word of God’.” (A&P 2003, p. 252)

The Presbyterian Church in Canada, Polity and Unity

Our governance expresses that unity in the real connections that bind sessions together in mission. As the Clerks of Assembly reported to the 2016 General Assembly, “Congregations are not independent bodies within our church. They are a part of The Presbyterian Church in Canada which is governed by the Book of Forms and the Presbyterian system of church government.” (A&P 2016, p. 281) This system of church government is conciliar; that is, we are governed by courts not a hierarchy of individual bishops. Decisions are made in the courts of the church – in sessions, presbyteries, synods and the General Assembly. We are connected by a system of study, discussion and vote on matters of policy and doctrine.

The clerks noted this sense of connection applies to congregational finances: “when donors through the years have given to the congregation, they have given to a congregation of The Presbyterian Church in Canada for the purposes of The Presbyterian Church in Canada.” (A&P 2016, p. 282) Trustees hold the deed for the property in trust for the congregation, but only so long as it is a congregation within the Presbyterian Church in Canada. Should it cease to be a congregation within the Presbyterian Church in Canada, title to the property devolves to the national trustees.

This connection between congregations also applies to membership, as the Clerks note “we are members both of a local congregation and also of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. A member in good standing has the right to present a membership certificate to any session of any congregation in the country and immediately claim the privileges of membership in that congregation by virtue of their membership in The Presbyterian Church in Canada.” (A&P 2016, p. 282–83)

A commitment to unity comes naturally to Canadian Presbyterians. The Presbyterian Church in Canada was born when Canadian members decided differences important enough to divide the Church of Scotland were irrelevant in Canada. While the Presbyterian Church continues to exist in Canada because of concerns with the particular structure of the 1925 plan for union that created the United Church of Canada, it is still committed to the idea that all Christ's followers should in some way be seen to be united.

Through most of their histories, each of the various theological traditions (and the particular denominational organizations that grew up within them) tended to consider itself the faithful embodiment of the Christian faith and tended to see other organizations and traditions as, in some way, falling short of that ideal. The growth of the 20th century ecumenical movement broke those barriers, with even the Roman Catholic Church recognizing Protestants as "separated brethren".

The Presbyterian Church in Canada expresses this impulse to ecumenical unity, for example, through our membership in the Canadian Council of Churches, World Council of Churches and the World Communion of Reformed Churches, our bilateral covenants with denominations like the Christian Reformed Church in North America, our observer status in the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, and our partnerships in mission groups like the ACT Alliance. This may not be full organizational union, but it is a way of obeying Christ's desire for the church to be united.

What is Essential?

In seeking to serve Christ together, The Presbyterian Church in Canada embraces the spirit of the slogan born in the heat of the 16th century Reformation debates: "in essential things unity, in non-essential things freedom, and in all things charity". While the Presbyterian Church has not formally listed what things are essential, that at least some things are essential is clear, for example, when ministers at their ordination or induction testify by their signatures their "adherence to those things declared and required to be accepted in the preamble and questions at the ordination of a minister". (Book of Forms 446)

The 2003 study document "Confessing the Faith Today" offers this summary: "In taking ordination or designation vows, ministers of Word and Sacraments, Diaconal ministers and ruling elders commit themselves first to God the Father, made known in his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom the Holy Spirit witnesses in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments; secondly, to the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, the written Word of God, as the canon of all doctrine by which Christ rules the church's faith and life; and thirdly to the confessional heritage of the ecumenical creeds, Reformed confessions and the subordinate standards of the church, promising to uphold its doctrines under the continual illumination and correction of the Holy Spirit speaking in the scriptures." (A&P 2003, p. 264)

Together with other Christian traditions, the Presbyterian Church has struggled with the question of what is essential in the church's ministry and message in society.

For instance, as the church was being founded at the end of the 19th century, the temperance social reform movement was sweeping North America. From newly-formed frontier settlements to established industrial inner cities, many Presbyterian leaders helped advance the movement. It seemed a morally-intelligible response to social stresses made worse by alcohol abuse. They rallied people to pass and support prohibition legislation to make sure their communities stayed "dry" and protected against "demon rum".

Some of these church leaders faced strong opposition, eventually even within their own church communities. A century removed from the controversy, it was hard to feel the passion the issue raised. For some, the temperance movement was an essential part of the Christian witness for social reform. For others, it was an overreaction to a problem that needed a more subtle and nuanced response.

Was support for prohibition policies an essential part of the Christian social witness? Eventually people began to see temperance was not abstinence, and noticed the Bible's concern was not simply with drinking but with drunkenness (that is, excessive drinking). Avoiding alcohol entirely became seen as a permissible way to avoid drunkenness, but not a necessary conclusion from the biblical witness. After all, didn't Paul advise

Timothy, “No longer drink only water, but take a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments?” (1 Timothy 5:23)

The echoes of this disagreement reverberate today. Some congregations still have rules against alcohol use on church property. Presbyterians who defend those rules argue never drinking is the safest way to avoid excessive drinking. However, for the denomination as a whole, the controversy is more of an historical curiosity than a present reality, and people do not often talk about whether they, personally, drink or abstain from alcohol. That is, until someone wonders why they cannot have their reception in their church hall.

Another issue from the founding days of The Presbyterian Church in Canada was the presence of instruments in the sanctuary. Worship in the earliest Presbyterian congregations was a cappella, with a precentor setting the pitch and leading the congregation in singing. In frontier congregations, this was practical: organs are expensive and not nearly as important on a winter morning as a well-functioning, well-fuelled furnace. But established urban congregations also considered organs inappropriate for divine worship. The attitude was the heir of the English reform impulse to remove ostentation and ornamentation from churches in pursuit of a pure, simple focus on God and God’s word.

That began to change in the late 1800s, as some leading Presbyterian congregations began installing organs in their sanctuaries. This caused great controversy in the newly-formed The Presbyterian Church in Canada. People left congregations after organs were installed and ministers were criticized for introducing divisive innovations into congregational life. Across the denomination, the controversy began to settle down as people began to appreciate the value of organs and other instruments to enliven congregational worship.

Echoes of this historic controversy reverberate in present discussions about “contemporary” and “traditional” worship styles. Just as when the organs and pianos were introduced a century ago, people are leaving congregations when organs and pianos are replaced by guitars, basses and drums. These changes are largely not seen as divisive innovations but as efforts to re-contextualize historic worship in a new generation.

Commonality and Contextualization

The pursuit of unity across a denomination like The Presbyterian Church in Canada is the quest for a proper balance between commonality and contextualization. As noted earlier, to borrow again the words from the Clerks of Assembly’s report to the 2016 General Assembly, “Congregations are not independent bodies within our church. They are a part of The Presbyterian Church in Canada...” (A&P 2016, p. 281) Some practices reflect the essential identity of the Presbyterian Church and need to be shared in all congregations, but neither are congregations identical bodies with our church. They exist in particular places and minister to particular groups of people. This requires a certain freedom to contextualize worship and service in those situations. However, there is a constant struggle with the question of when contextualization has changed something essentially Presbyterian.

The Presbyterian Church in Canada affords considerable room for diversity and innovation, but not unlimited room, and there is greater room for diversity in personal belief than in visible practice. In the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, for example, Presbyterians can hold a range of understandings as they participate. Some commune believing it to be simply a memorial of Christ’s work on the cross; others partake recognizing the real presence of Jesus in the bread and the cup. But normally all use the elements of bread and grape beverage. Ministers are free to baptize by immersion or sprinkling, and to baptize believing adults and children of church members; but a minister who refused in principle to perform infant baptisms would be removed from the pulpit.

Perhaps the best example of the tension between commonality and contextualization is in the question of ordination of women. The Presbyterian Church in Canada was formed with an understanding only men were eligible to hold church offices. That began to change in the late 20th century as some congregations saw the gifts for ministry women in their community had and began to interpret the scriptures differently. These congregations eventually gained the freedom to contextualize their ministry to recognize those gifts and elect women to offices in the church.

Just like membership is not a purely local function in The Presbyterian Church in Canada, neither is election to office. Again, as the Clerks of Assembly reported in 2016, professing members “are members both of a local congregation and also of The Presbyterian Church in Canada”. (A&P 2016, p. 282) So also, elders are elders both of a local congregation and also of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. But women elected to be teaching and ruling elders in particular contextualized ministries were not recognized as elders in other ministries. This created a tension in Presbyterian polity that was eventually resolved by declaring the eligibility of women for church offices was an essential part of Presbyterian identity.

While privately Presbyterians may hold a range of convictions about the ordination of women, in the public conduct of presbytery business, all presbyters are expected to participate collegially with all those recognized in the offices of the church. As with all such discussions, this resulted in people leaving the Presbyterian church. No one was told to leave, but people realized they could not be part of a church where they were not free to act in harmony with their conscience.

The question of the ordination of women also offers an illustration of the distinction between pursuing the unity of the Holy Catholic Church and the unity of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. Presbyterians maintain ecumenical relationships with Christian bodies that do not allow women to serve in church offices. We realize this is not an issue that defines the boundaries of the family of Jesus Christ. There is no particular reason why a presbyter in the Presbyterian Church should be a presbyter in the Roman Catholic Church. On the other hand, this is an issue that defines the boundaries of the Presbyterian church. The Presbyterian Church loses an essential part of its identity when a presbyter in one congregation is not recognized as a presbyter in all congregations.

We can see this in terms of the Reformation slogan “in essential things unity, in non-essential things freedom, and in all things charity”. With regard to the global Christian community, the ordination of women is a non-essential thing where different communions are free to follow their own convictions. With regard to The Presbyterian Church in Canada, though, this is an essential thing in which there must be unity. While a particular congregation, contextualizing their ministry to their particular situation, may for a time not elect women as active teaching or ruling elders, they must be prepared to embrace the ministry of women elders when the time arises.

Can We Agree to Disagree?

The question of the full inclusion of LGBTQI persons in the life of The Presbyterian Church in Canada seems to pose unique stresses on the covenant that binds the congregations of the denomination together. Is this an issue such as worship style, where congregations worshipping in contemporary and traditional styles can celebrate their common confession of faith? Or is this an issue like membership where one session’s decision to consider a person a member in good standing is expected to be affirmed by all sessions? Is this an essential thing where there needs to be unity, or a non-essential thing where there can be freedom to disagree?

The different answers to the question of LGBTQI welcome and inclusion are not simply two different opinions, but two different commitments growing out of profoundly different ways of looking at the world. David Gushee described the passion of the disagreement this way: “Those Christians standing up for LGBT equality and inclusion believe we are reflecting the deepest, truest values of Christ. Those standing against it believe the same thing. We will never, ever agree.”

The disagreement on this question puts such stress on our ability to maintain organizational unity because it is the tip of an iceberg of disagreements, most of which lie unexamined beneath the surface. Like different understandings of the Lord’s Supper, they pose no particular challenge for the unity of The Presbyterian Church in Canada so long as they remain personal opinions. Questions of marriage equality and ordination to church office bring these issues into very visible practice, and the deep division is very visible.

Disagreeing in Faith, Romans 14

An additional motion passed at the 2016 Assembly asked for “a consideration of Romans 14:1–13 as permission to recommend a dual or two-prong approach, in interest of avoiding rupture of the denomination”.

(A&P 2016, p. 39) Any consideration of Romans 14 should begin with a consideration of its place in the context of Romans. In a familiar pattern for a Pauline letter, 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 turns to the practical matters of how to live as a believer, and in particular, how to live in a church which has a history of some members using power to enforce unity. Leading up to chapter 14, Paul reminds his readers we are all one body in Christ (Romans 12:5) and we are to welcome and bless everyone, including those who might hurt us (Romans 12:13–14). Even when we engage and challenge civil authorities, we do so with respect and love (Romans 13:3, 13:10). We are to lay aside all self-indulgent behaviour, including our jealousies and quarrels, so that we might put on Christ (Romans 13:13–14).

Romans 13 points out all these commands, “and any other commandment”, are simply the way we love our neighbours as ourselves (Romans 13:9). Then Paul adds an additional motivation for changed behaviour: “For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light...” (Romans 13:11–12). In other words, “put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” (Romans 13:14).

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 (Romans 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 (Romans 14:10). We need to respect that we are each committed to Christ and ultimately accountable to only God (Romans 14:7–12). In this particular context, the debate was around food (Romans 14:2), wine (Romans 14:21), and which days are most holy (Romans 14:5). This was an argument about the law and about whether certain foods were clean or unclean (Romans 14:14).

Romans 14 begins with a call to “welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions” (Romans 14:1). The command here to welcome is a powerful word. It is more than the reluctant, often grudging endurance that too often characterizes diversity in contemporary culture. The image behind the Greek term is a compound of “taking hold of” and “bringing close to”. There is an openness and warmth in this embrace that is easy to lose sight of these days.

We need to keep a firm grip on the purpose of this embrace. This is “not for the purpose of quarrelling”. This is a call to welcome the other, opinions and all, without trying to judge who is right and who is wrong. This is a sharp contrast from the attitude of Romans 13. In that chapter, Paul was clear some things are right and some things are wrong: Christians are to “live...not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy” (Romans 13:13).

That Paul raises this issue in this way suggests some in Rome evidently thought there was nothing wrong with a little licentiousness, quarrelling or jealousy now and then. In these things, even if some disagreed, there is right and wrong, and Christians are to avoid the wrong. No matter what a person’s individual opinions, “Love does no harm to a neighbour” (Romans 13:10, NIV). Those things are deeds of darkness which Christians must renounce. Continuing to cause harm and contribute to harm cannot be an option for The Presbyterian Church in Canada as it seeks unity in the bond of peace. The things in Romans 14 are of a different sort. These are choices that are not ultimately right or wrong but are simply different ways of offering thanks and praise to the Lord. “Those who observe the day, observe it in honour of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honour of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honour of the Lord and give thanks to God.” (Romans 14:6)

Murdering, stealing, coveting and all the other ways of doing harm that Romans 13 discusses are not simply different ways of honouring the Lord. But the choices in Romans 14 are, and this is why the welcome can be extended without trying to settle things. We focus on our common goal of honouring the Lord rather than the specific choices we make about how to do that. “Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them.” (Romans 14:2–3)

What are the presenting issues in Romans 14? While we may never know the exact context of their debate, the church in Rome likely shared in the first generation tension between Jewish and Gentile converts to faith. Some scholars make a connection here to Paul's discussion on idol meat in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10 (for example, N.T. Wright), while others see a more localized concern with traditional observance of Jewish dietary and ritual practices (for example, C.E.B. Cranfield). Regardless, it is clear the disagreement was a source of tension for the church and had passionate supporters on either side.

Instead of focusing on which side is right or wrong, Paul shifts attention and asks: who is strong and who is weak in faith. Those who identify themselves to be strong (and therefore "right") have a special responsibility towards the people who disagree with them, the "weak" (Romans 15:1). The strong are neither to bash the weak with righteous arguments nor flaunt their religious freedoms because that might cause the weak to stumble in their faith (Romans 14:21). Instead, we are called to pursue peace (Romans 14:19), build up each other (Romans 15:2) and live in harmony (Romans 15:5).

For Paul, in Romans 14, none of these were works of darkness that did harm to one's neighbour. The church could safely embrace all these choices by affirming their deeper unity in declaring the praise of Jesus Christ.

This does not overrule the teaching of Romans 13. Some disagreements between Christians need to be resolved by those living in error laying aside works of darkness that do harm to one's neighbour. In contrast, 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 (Romans 14:16), but our actions need to demonstrate compassion and Christ's love.

Romans 14 questions our motivations. In our debates, are we motivated by a selfish need to be "right"; or do we disagree out of a genuine concern and love for our neighbour? What actions and words might help lift up "the weak"? How do we show love and support to people who might never agree with us?

The Debate Today

As noted before, The Presbyterian Church in Canada is diverse enough to embrace many different worship styles. How can we do this? Officers in The Presbyterian Church in Canada promise to "accept the subordinate standards of this church, promising to uphold its doctrine under the continual illumination and correction of the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures". So long as the worship they lead fulfills this promise, they are free to contextualize the worship in any way that allows the gathered community to join in praise. To borrow the language of Romans 14, these are simply different ways of honouring the Lord and giving thanks to God. Contextualizing ministry in diverse circumstances will lead to these kinds of diversity in practice. The command to unity is satisfied in that they are all offering praise.

But the question of LGBTQI inclusion is not simply a matter of personal preference. For example, some believe the traditional doctrine itself causes harm to LGBTQI people, including an increased risk of suicide. The Moderator, Peter Bush, described that harm this way:

Families have felt and still feel the church's expectations to condemn and reject children, siblings and parents who do not look, act or speak in ways congruent with the restrictive gender definitions of the church and society. Friends feel pressure to break off connections. For the ways our congregations judge and exclude others based on restrictive gender definitions, we are sorry, and we repent. (Letter of Repentance from the Moderator, Peter Bush, February 12, 2018)

As the Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it, "The sixth commandment forbiddeth the taking away of our own life, or the life of our neighbour unjustly, or whatsoever tendeth thereunto." (Question 69, emphasis

added) That would make excluding LGBTQI youth a violation of the sixth commandment. It would be a breaking of the law of love; it would be something Romans 13 says Christians must “lay aside [to] put on the armour of light...” (Romans 13:12). Is it possible to imagine a welcome that would be content not to quarrel over this opinion? Is this the kind of thing the church can embrace without trying to decide who is right and who is wrong?

The additional motion’s “interest of avoiding rupture of the denomination” is one most Presbyterians can share. Every officer in The Presbyterian Church in Canada commits to defending the unity of the church in the promise “to follow no divisive course but to seek the peace and unity of Christ among your people and throughout the Holy Catholic Church”. This promise means more than simply defending the organization of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, for surely ecumenical unity is included in seeking “peace and unity...throughout the Holy Catholic Church”. And defending the peace of the church surely includes finding a way to get out of a continual cycle of contentious debate.

The question having been joined, there are no easy, painless solutions. How do we find a way forward together?

The Church’s Current Conversation

In 2015, when the General Assembly called on “the church (congregations, sessions, presbyteries, synods and denominational committees)...to engage in a year of prayerful conversation and discernment and Bible study on the topics of human sexuality, sexual orientation and other related matters”, it also invited them “to share the result of their conversation with both the Committee on Church Doctrine and Life and Mission Agency (Justice Ministries)”. (A&P 2015, p. 43, 44) The Assembly expressed no definition of the purpose of this sharing.

We do not do theology through popular opinion because the truths of the gospel are true whether or not they are popular. (For example, Jesus was still “the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father” whether Athanasius was in or out of favour.) Still, if we are to chart a way forward together, a due regard for the church as a whole means we should have some respect for the current opinions of The Presbyterian Church in Canada as a whole.

With appropriate caution, the sharing the Assembly invited in 2015 can help in this. The 2017 General Assembly invited the church as a whole to join in another round of study and response. The comments people shared from those conversations do not constitute a statistically representative sample of the church as a whole: they come from people invested enough in the issue to take part in the study and send a comment. Having asked for their comments, we do well to reflect on what those who took the time to study and respond show us about our present position as we consider a way forward.

The responses show a denomination deeply divided on this question. Many believe it is a gospel imperative to change our teaching. Many believe the gospel requires us to maintain our present teaching. Some are frustrated because they have done the study, embraced a new teaching and are ready to move forward with it; why must we be held back by a denomination too afraid to embrace change? Others are frustrated because their study has confirmed their confession about human sexuality and want to get on with sharing the call to new life in Christ; why must we delay with discussion about an issue we’ve already answered?

A fair conclusion from reading these responses is any decision the Assembly makes on this question will place great strains, and perhaps break, the ties that hold the Presbyterian Church together.