

On Agreeing to Disagree

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When the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) meets in Long Beach, California, this June, it will be confronted by a number of overtures that, though they vary in the particulars, share an important similarity; namely, that in the face of apparently intransigent disagreement, separation seems the only viable alternative for the PC(USA).¹ In light of the pitched battles over Amendments A and B and the current debate over G-6.0106b, each of these overtures seeks a way out of the morass of anger, suspicion, and—above all—exhaustion, that characterizes not only our actual disagreements over sexuality, but our willingness to engage with our brothers and sisters across the theological divide.

Having attended seminary and begun my ministry in the midst of these controversies, I share the deep frustration and emotional fatigue out of which these overtures have arisen. These issues have been at the center of PC(USA) politics for as long as I have worked in and for the church, and like most other members of the church, I usually wish that they would just go away.

Nevertheless, I am increasingly convicted that the answers given by these overtures are wrong for the denomination. Separation—whether from the PC(USA) or within it—is precisely the answer that we ought not pursue. Instead, there is a desperate need for us to reconstruct the terms of the debate so that we might at least move it forward, if not immediately resolve it. After all, our frustration has as much to do with this argument's intransigence as its existence. In what follows, I will briefly suggest three foci of the current debate that, in spite of the emphasis they have been given in the pages of various journals or on the floors of our presbyteries, are not really central to our conversations about divisions within the PC(USA). While I am certain that few of us actually would accept any of these foci when pressed, in the heat of battle the rhetoric of our debates often shrinks to these concerns. Thus, in naming them, I hope not so much to reveal new ideas as to confirm our current careful thoughts. That section completed, I will then suggest three topics that our conversations can be about if we are willing to set aside our current language-use. While these topics bear further development than I can pursue here, they are at least worth exploring toward that reconstruction and with an eye to the future of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

I. What the Conversation Isn't About

First, our current debate is not about the authority of Scripture over against some other authority. There are two widespread stereotypes beyond which we must move simply in the interest of understanding other positions. The first of these is that those on the theological left have surrendered the Bible in order to pursue cultural values or to establish “worldly” norms in the church. The second is that those on the theological right work out of an outmoded and theologically problematic method of interpreting Scripture (read: “fundamentalist”). These stereotypes share a common set of false premises: that the other side doesn't know what to do with Scripture, that a more careful reading of Scripture would resolve our debates, and that our inability to reach

resolution must therefore be the product of the other side's avoidance of or inadequacy in using Scripture.

Neither stereotype accurately reflects the problems we face. In the Reformed tradition, we have not historically practiced a literalist reading strategy when dealing with the Bible. While our strategies have changed over time, since Calvin we have recognized that interpretation plays a key role in our reading. Moreover, by ignoring the tensions of interpretation that actually do exist, we sink to name-calling and diminish the capacity of our actual conversation to lead to any type of resolution.

Second, our debate is not about the denomination surrendering to cultural pressures. That is, our struggles with homosexuality are the direct result neither of increasing social pressure to accept gay and lesbian people nor of rising levels of homophobia. Obviously, the church is impacted by society. Movements in some states to allow same-sex marriages, by some corporations to cover gay and lesbian partners under health care plans, or on the part of various organizations that promote adoption by same-sex couples find their corollaries in the church. Yet in these and similar examples, the peculiar relationship between church and state in the U. S., let alone the complex relationship between church and culture, confounds any attempt to easily equate movements within the denomination to those within society.

Likewise, there is homophobia in the church. Yet while the church certainly bears its share of responsibility for promoting homophobia among its members and it needs to atone for its sins in that regard, it is not the case that those who oppose the ordination of gays and lesbians are necessarily homophobic. Many churches that have opposed such ordinations have, nevertheless, embraced gays and lesbians as valuable members of their congregations. Anyone who has sat and listened to a pastor agonize over the decision not to support those ordinations while fearing that her or his decision will be seen as giving license to acts of violence against gays and lesbians cannot ignore the degree to which those on both sides of the debate are concerned about the stigmatization and victimization of gays and lesbians in contemporary U.S. society. We ought not demean the complexity of our debate by accusing the other side of selling out to society.

Third, our debate is not simply ecclesiastical infighting. There is a growing sense that the church's preoccupation with its standards for ordination is precisely that: a preoccupation with the church rather than a pursuit of the church's mission in the world. Indeed, many of the current overtures for separation are premised upon the belief that the church has lost its sense of purpose and become primarily concerned with its own existence. As a result, so the argument goes, membership is declining, interest in church life is wavering, and litigiousness increases. Yet while these problems ought to concern us, it is not clear that they are related to our debates about ordination, nor that such debates ought not be a concern of the church.

II. What Our Conversations Can Be About

If our debates are not about the authority of Scripture over against some other authority, the church kowtowing to social mores, or ecclesial infighting, then what are they—or can they—be about? I would argue that those who have located the debate on the issues above are not entirely misguided, and that we might still learn something important from them. Yet such a process of learning would mean not taking their arguments at face value, but instead diving deeper into them, retrieving some aspects

of those ideas while rejecting those that are unhelpful or untrue. Toward that end, let me make three suggestions about what our conversations are or can be about, each of which builds from while modifying the positions I laid out above.

II.a. Reading Scripture Together

Lost in the furor of debates about Scriptural authority is the degree to which our disagreements have sent all of us back to the Bible. All sides have sought support for their positions within our sacred texts and, while we may disagree with the way other people are using the Bible, we cannot deny that they are using it.

This, in itself, is remarkable. Regardless of what side of the issue we stand on, we think that what the Bible has to say is relevant to the discussion. In an age marked by congregational confusion about what to do with the Bible, sermons built around social issues, and Sunday school curricula for youth and adults that treat Scripture peripherally, the conclusion that we need to look to the Bible needs to be affirmed, not ignored.

Of course, the conclusion reached by all sides that we need to look to the Bible does not necessarily mean that we will resolve our differences. The Bible is neither an instruction manual nor an arbiter of disagreements. What this conclusion does do, however, is recast the tenor of our current debate. The question is not whether one side treats the Bible normatively or not, nor even whether the Bible is important to this debate. The question is how we can learn to read the Bible together. That is, how can we sit next to people with whom we disagree and read the same texts?

This, I think, may be the most important question we face as we continue to debate the ordination of gays and lesbians. Moreover, by asking it, we will be able to draw on resources that we have currently cut ourselves off from—including Scripture itself. That is, we might productively read the Bible itself as a continued attempt to give voice to God's revelatory Word in the face of disagreements about how God acts in history and how we ought to respond to that action. Whether in Deuteronomy's reconstruction of the exodus event, Matthew's emphasis on Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, or Paul's attempt to orient Christian faith around the person of Jesus Christ rather than the Kingdom of God *per se*, the Bible is its own greatest dialectic partner. By disagreeing about how to read the Bible together, we merely reveal our continuity with those whose voices it contains—and the possibility that we might reach new understanding and answers just as they did.

Moreover, by reorienting ourselves around the question of how to read the Bible together, we can draw on a long tradition—one that certainly includes modern methods of biblical interpretation, but also precedes those methods by centuries—in our attempt to make sense of our current dilemmas.

Answering the question of how to read the Bible together will involve an extended and often difficult process of educating ourselves—clergy and laity alike—in the Bible and its interpretation. But we should be doing this anyway. (One wonders if our current debates would be nearly so divisive if we had been doing our job all along.) And we will almost undoubtedly discover goods from learning to read the Bible together that move far beyond simply settling our current disagreements. All of which will be to the greater glory of the God to whom our Scriptures give witness.

II.b. Translating the Church for the World

If the church is like society when it comes to homosexuality, it is like it in the

following sense: it doesn't know what to make of homosexuality, either. That is, the denomination seems to be as Janus-faced in its treatment of gays and lesbians as broader society. Yet the church has several advantages over society as it tries to clarify its position. First, it manages to be simultaneously as diverse as while being less pluralistic than society. Made up of persons across racial, economic, political, age, and gender spectrums, the church is a microcosm of U.S. society. Yet all these people are—to some degree—united by their common sense of belonging. They are guided by the sense that Jesus Christ has something important to say to them and the conviction that he has chosen to speak to them through Word and Sacrament as they are practiced within the Reformed tradition. Second, this common sense of belonging provides—or can provide—a basic vocabulary, shared resources and authorities (liturgy, Scripture), and a mutually acknowledged goal (loving God and neighbor). Whatever divisions exist in the denomination, those divisions do not go all the way down, so to speak. Instead, they are encompassed in a broader set of agreements, and it is those agreements upon which our polity is based. Third, these agreements contain within themselves a command to work together in the midst of and even by virtue of our differences (1 Corinthians 12-13).

It follows, then, that the church is in the position not only to reveal differences similar to those in society, but also to witness to strategies for overcoming divisions that could be valuable for broader society. That is, the church has the chance to show a way of public living in which unity can exist within diversity. In a society lacking such witnesses, the church has a unique opportunity to exemplify both disagreement and commonality, an opportunity which it ought not waste.

II.c. Exploring How to Be the Church

The debate over the ordination of gays and lesbians is not just an ecclesiastical issue that ignores the more important responsibility of the church to be a witness to Jesus Christ. It is fundamentally a debate about what it means to be the church in the world. It raises questions about the way the church practices hospitality and cares for those who suffer, the witness it gives for dealing with the tension between unity and diversity, and the meaning of ordination within the context of the priesthood of all believers. Each of these questions not only has implications for intra-ecclesial disputes, but for the church's own self-understanding as an entity directed toward the world.

Take, for example, the tension between ordaining some and being a priesthood of all believers. Our current emphasis on conscience as bound only by God (*Book of Order*, G-1.0301) seems to stand at odds with several of the Constitutional Questions asked of ordinands as described in G-14.0405b. Is it? While it may sound cliché, the apparent contradiction between those two passages constitutes a teaching moment through which we might all gain a better understanding of the complex relationships between believer, officer, and God as expressed in the Reformed Tradition. We might develop a better sense of what it means to be called by God into a vocation and therein recover for all believers a way of living in the world between Monday and Saturday that is gradually disappearing. We might discover a way of being democratic and ordered that could be put in the service of a society in which the public office of "citizen" is widely misunderstood, rejected, or ignored. We might even realize that our polity still needs to be reformed: *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*.

In all of this, we can do more than engage in petty in-church bickering. We can treat our current debates as the launching pad for becoming a church that is constantly being reformed by God for God's purposes.

III. On Agreeing to Disagree

If our conversation can be about these things—if our conversation can be about learning how to read Scripture together, how to relate the church to society, and how to be the church in society—then separation is precisely the wrong answer to our present problems. This is not to say that separation may not become necessary at some point in the future. The Christian church was born in an act of separation from Judaism and the Reformed church was born in an act of separation from Roman Catholicism. Yet separation ought not be our first answer when we haven't even done a good job of clarifying the questions yet.

There are constructive possibilities in disagreement that we ignore when we emphasize "just getting along with each other." Disagreements are symptoms of our dissatisfaction with things as they are. Disagreements prod us to push forward, to test new ideas, to reexamine our own lives and the life of the church. Indeed, they have tended to be the very engine that drives the church forward into God's future. And if we believe that the church has and will continue to exist only by God's graceful will and powerful command, they may well be one of the most significant ways God acts in the church's life.

I have suggested that in spite of our frustration with and exhaustion from the current debate about the ordination of gays and lesbians—a frustration and exhaustion I share—there are ways of thinking about the debate that might turn us from its problems toward its possibilities. Among those possibilities are the opportunities for the church to learn to read Scripture together, to serve as a witness to unity in the midst of diversity for a society that desperately needs it, and to open itself to God's reforming actions in its life. Yet in order to pursue these possibilities, we need to reconstruct our current debates. We need to recognize actual points of contention as well as agreement. We need to extend ourselves toward understanding the positions of those with whom we disagree. And we need to clarify for ourselves the difference between thinking that the church's current direction will lead inevitably toward separation and thinking that the church's current direction is inevitable. Perhaps the first half of that statement is true. The latter half certainly isn't—especially as the church is directed by a God through whom all things are possible.

Obviously, much of what I have argued here needs to be fleshed out. That is properly the task of many, not just one. But if nothing else, this article might signify the possibilities that might come about by reconstructing our perspectives on our current debates. After all, if my arguments here make sense, then we ought not treat disagreement as a symptom of the church's collapse, but as a sign of the church's health. In that light, agreeing to disagree—and not agreeing to separate—contains at its heart a theological affirmation about the power of God to act in and through the church—one which we can ignore only at our own peril.

Note

See, e.g., Overtures 00-5 and 00-6 from the Presbytery of Beaver-Butler and 00-46 from the Presbytery of Santa Fe and 00-48 from the Presbytery of Hudson River. The first two overtures advocate the

disaffiliation of those congregations that cannot in good conscience comply with G-6.0106b. The latter two recommend the establishment of a waiver that releases a governing body from enforcing that section of the *Book of Order*. Aside from the anomalous exception in G-14.0202a(2) designed to facilitate reunion, this would be the only instance of waivers being based on conscience rather than necessity. The problem is acute in the PCUSA. This discussion, however, treats a critical issue that is alive across denominational lines. What is suggested here for the PCUSA is, *mutatis mutandis*, more generally pertinent to this larger church emergency.