

Navigating Through Controversies: Discerning God's Will

The PC(USA) denomination is currently responding to several critical issues the church faces today. As debates arise within the church on sexual orientation issues, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, abortion, and other social issues, where is the church to turn for answers? Question thirty-nine of the Westminster Shorter Catechism asks, "What is the duty which God requireth of man?" "The duty which God requireth of man is obedience to his revealed will." The duty for the church is to obey God's revealed will as it is known through the moral law, scripture, prayer, and revelation by the Holy Spirit. If our denomination can attain broad consensus of God's revealed will, we will not only be fulfilling our duty to God, but we will likely also come to a place of agreement on controversial social issues.

The question of which side of the controversy the church will land is less significant than the faithful process by which the church aims to discern and obey God's will. The process of coming to a conclusion on a moral dilemma seems to be one of the greatest challenges within the church and the largest potential factor for division of the church. Over fifty years ago, the 1958 Statement of the PC(USA) affirmed the church's responsibility to speak on social and moral issues for the encouragement and instruction of the church, seeking to know the mind of Christ and tempering all speech with humility and love; and the church was reminded to practice daily obedience to God's will (p.537). These principles remain equally relevant to the church's discussion of moral dilemmas today. And the conversation between persons of differing viewpoints will make greater strides if we follow the Apostle Paul's admonishment to walk with "all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing one another in love and making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:1-3).

A moral dilemma can be defined as existing when there are two soundly reasoned alternatives that are mutually exclusive to a moral issue - or where there seems to be no simple

solutions to the moral issue. When encountered with these moral decisions it is important to remember our church's constitution which states that there are truths over which people of "good characters and principles" will differ (G-1.0305), meaning there are devoted Christians, who, acting under the authority of the same scripture, will come to different interpretations and conclusions. We interpret the will of God differently, and all sides have some truth to offer the others.

In a paper titled, *How to Discuss Moral Issues Surrounding Homosexuality When You Know You Are Right*. Nancy J. Duff, of Princeton Theological Seminary, brings up the point that, "more energy is often given to strategies for winning the political day than to discussing the issue with opponents." This leads the two sides each believing they have "taken the moral high road" - that they both are correctly interpreting the will of God, and the consequence is that both sides can become embroiled in a battle, each aiming to be the moral victor. I believe that if we are to truly discern God's will, we must abandon self-righteousness, and a passion for moral victories, and focus first on truly listening to one another, so that we may come to an understanding of those who have a different interpretation of God's will.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism says in question forty two that the sum of the Ten Commandments is: "to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength, and with all our mind; and our neighbor as ourselves." Christ calls us to love God with all our mind, which means being open to other minds that think differently. He calls us to love one another as ourselves. Remembering this in intense church-threatening debates will help bring unity to our church. As Christians, especially within the same denomination, if we are "to bear with one another in love," it is crucial to make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. Christians, or more specifically, Presbyterians are to keep this unity through being humble, gentle, and patient with one another and the PC(USA) denomination. It is hard for the different sides of an issue to recognize the truth in the other's view, especially if their main goal is to win a debate and ignore how they are hurting the church.

John Stuart Mill proposes in his essay "On Liberty," three reasons of why both sides of an opposing view must be taken into consideration, even if each side believes their viewpoint is truthful, or they have the correct interpretation of God's revealed will. Mill's first argument is that "To refuse a hearing to an opinion because" ...one side is... "sure that it is false, is to assume that their certainty is the same thing as absolute certainty. All silencing of discussion is an assumption of infallibility." Because we are all fallible, Mill is saying that, if we silence an opposing opinion, the truth may be silenced. Mill goes on to claim that there is a major difference "between the assumption that an opinion is true because it has withstood opposition, and assuming it is true in order to stifle the opposition" (p. 146, Duff). The next reason Mill gives is that even if both sides believe the other is wrong, it is likely that each perspective includes some truth. If people from opposing viewpoints are able to identify and acknowledge the truth behind the other's perspective, they are more likely to be able to persuade their opponent as well as identify aspects of both viewpoints that need correction. The final reason Mill gives is that even if one side does hold the whole truth, but is unwilling to listen to the other side's opinions, then there is a risk of being labeled as being prejudiced.

People who engage in conversations with those who hold different views can gain new insights and develop and strengthen their own viewpoints because of their willingness to listen to a different perspective. Such conversations approached with humility forge the way through the moral dilemma as truths are discerned, common ground is found, and a growing consensus emerges. As Christians, this process is enhanced because we share common scriptures, value the power of prayer and have the benefit of the Holy Spirit to guide us through the process.

In the case of ordaining persons who are homosexual, it is important to realize that the difference is not that one side is trusting in the authority of the Bible and the other is not. It is a matter of interpretation. How do we determine which interpretation is more faithful? In Acts 15, when the great council of Jerusalem met to discern if the Gentiles would be included or not, "new *revelation* along with confirmation by *experience* was placed and with a testing by *Scripture* are the proper measurements for the church...Appeals to revelation, Scripture, and experience do

not settle the church's inner differences" then, nor do they now. But revelation, scripture, and experience do determine the boundaries for our debates. "They are the ultimate court of appeal." (Willimon, p. 130) It is our responsibility as members of the church, threatened by schism, not to allow our differences to damage our peace and unity but rather recognize our differences and accept them.

Eugene Peterson wrote an interesting article in Seattle Pacific University's *Response* magazine about unity within the larger Christian Church. His words are both relevant and helpful to us as we face potential schism within the Presbyterian Church. When dealing with questions about division within the church, Peterson turns to what he calls "the John Seventeen Prayer Meeting" where we are invited to listen as Jesus prays to the Father 'that they may be one, as we are one.'" Peterson goes on to say "Sitting in the presence of Jesus as he prays that I and my brothers and sisters in Christ 'may be one, as we are on,' I don't so much find out what to do, but what not to do." Jesus' prayer doesn't allow me to walk out, to solve the problem by schism, or to impose my will upon my brothers and sister. If, and only if, I stay in the room with Jesus as he prays for me and my friends do I find myself able to embrace all the baptized as brothers and sisters. It requires patience. Jesus doesn't take shortcuts. It is slow in coming, but eventually Jesus' prayer does have its way with me."

The Presbyterian Church can learn from Peterson's example and slowly embrace our differences as we both pray and work for unity. When we pray, we not only pray for unity but pray for Jesus' prayer to have its way with us. The answer to this prayer is not a forced unity that rejects all who do not conform to one's own views. It is not answered by making enclaves or theological camps of like-minded people. Allowing God to reveal his will to us as a whole church will take time and Presbyterians need to have patience, humility, and a loving, forbearing spirit if we are to allow God to have God's way with us - and for his will to be revealed. It is the duty and work of the church to address differences through civility and respect and with an open heart and mind.

It's tempting to think that if we can only get back to Pentecost, back to the original unity of the church, back to embodying the Spirit that we can make come to a place of agreement on the challenging and divisive social issues that now threaten the church. But there was no uniformity in the early church either, and you can't capture the Spirit by going backwards any more than you can sail a boat on the wind that was blowing yesterday. The Spirit is always propelling us forward, blowing exactly where the Spirit wills. In John 16:13, Jesus promised to leave us the Spirit to "guide (us) into all the truth" - into discerning God's will. We are, after all, a church that is reformed and always reforming, according to God's Living Word in Christ. And it is our task to listen, to listen closely and attentively to the Spirit speaking to us through one another. A posture of listening with attentive, open and humble hearts was the primary feature of the Church at Pentecost. It's what we need today.

Peter's Pentecost sermon broke through the confusion of all those diverse voices at Pentecost by focusing on one person: "Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders and signs that God did through him among you." (Acts 2:22) As Richard Lischer of Duke Divinity School says: "In Peter's sermon, it's as if the Parthians, Medes, and Elamites step off the treadmill of history for a moment and join hands in a vast circle and look to the center. Included in that circle are liberals and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans, gay and straight, high church and low church, Second World and Third, ghetto and suburbs. And behold there at the center — this 'Jesus.' In him the center holds. Forces of disunity are arrayed against us and displayed within us, but in Jesus Christ, the center of our discourse with one another holds." The same Spirit by which God raised Jesus from the dead and placed him at the very center of our church is still moving among us, able to overcome divisions, to reconcile, and to heal. Are we listening to the leading of the Spirit?

Nancy Duff's words are wise counsel: "We continue to struggle to discern God's will in the world. For those of us who find (in these controversial issues) no moral dilemma, the real dilemma resides in the question of whether we can live together as members of the one body of Christ even when divided by issues on which both sides know with such certainty that they are

right." Certainly we can all agree that our ultimate desire is to love one another as we bear faithful witness to Jesus Christ, doing God's will not our own. And certainly we can agree that as we speak the truth in love to one another, no one person or party's interpretation of "truth" becomes more important than the truth of the relationship we have in Christ that holds us together as one body. All this is possible, if and only if, we choose to meet with Jesus and one another in the John Seventeen Prayer Room, where we have a rare opportunity to embrace all the baptized as brothers and sisters and, as the Westminster Shorter Catechism states, "to know, obey, and submit to [God's] will in all things."

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