
IS CHRIST DIVIDED?



A Report
Approved By The 200th General Assembly (1988)
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

IS CHRIST DIVIDED?

Report of the Task Force on Theological Pluralism
Within the Presbyterian Community of Faith

COMMENDED FOR STUDY AND INFORMATION
BY THE 200TH GENERAL ASSEMBLY (1988)
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.)

THE OFFICE OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY
THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.)
LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY

Copyright © 1988
The Office of the General Assembly
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
All rights reserved

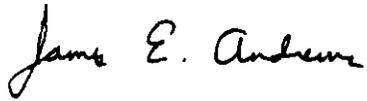
No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronically, mechanically, photocopying, recording, or otherwise (brief quotations used in magazine or newspaper reviews excepted), without the prior permission of the publisher.

January 1989

Dear Colleagues:

The study document entitled "*Is Christ Divided?*" is sent to you by direction of the 200th General Assembly (1988) which commended the report to the church for information and study. Please note that the distribution of the report by the Office of the General Assembly is limited to the executives and clerks of the presbyteries and synods. I hope you will be able to make the availability of the document known throughout your governing bodies, providing the ordering information which is printed on the inside front cover.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "James E. Andrews". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the word "Sincerely,".

James E. Andrews
Stated Clerk of the Assembly

INTRODUCTION

The Task Force on Theological Pluralism was established in 1985 by the Advisory Council on Discipleship and Worship and the Council on Theology and Culture with members appointed by those two councils and the Advisory Council on Church and Society.

The task force grew out of concerns raised within the Committee on Pluralism and Conflict of the Advisory Council on Discipleship and Worship, where regular consultations with special organizations (Chapter IX) consistently raised issues relating to theological diversity within the church. Among these issues were conflicting perspectives on the value of diverse theological positions, the limits of theological diversity within the church, and the ways in which theological diversity should be dealt with in the Presbyterian community of faith.

The composition of the task force reflects the diverse constituency of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Task force members are the Rev. Ruben Armendariz, a seminary professor from Chicago, Illinois; Elder Catherine G. Borchert, a presbytery stated clerk from Cleveland Heights, Ohio; Elder Joseph Dempsey, a businessman from Pacific Palisades, California; the Rev. J. Richard de Witt, a pastor from Memphis, Tennessee; the Rev. Gail Buchwalter King, a pastor from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Elder Kathryn Sandifer, a pastoral counselor from Tucker, Georgia; the Rev. Preston Williams, a seminary professor from Cambridge, Massachusetts; and the Rev. Joseph D. Small (chair and writer), a pastor from Rochester, New York. Staff assistance was provided by Elder Nancy Vanderburg of Eureka Springs, Arkansas, and the Rev. John Markarian of West Pittston, Pennsylvania. As we met together over a two-year period we discovered a deepening commitment to one another and to the task. Our discussions were frank, sometimes sharp, but we evolved a way of working together which exemplifies the kind of theological discourse which the report commends.

On the basis of early meetings, the task force organized its work into four areas of inquiry:

1. The Reformed Tradition
2. The Relationship Between Cultural Pluralism and Theological Diversity
3. Theological Diversity and Its Limits
4. Practical Implications

In pursuing its work, the task force engaged in an extensive review of literature which addresses the issues of unity and diversity, tolerance, and the limits to theological perspectives. As a framework for organizing the issues was developed, the task force solicited reflective responses from scholars in a number of disciplines and from other appropriate persons and groups. As

consensus was reached, drafts of the report were prepared and carefully reviewed by the task force and its parent bodies.

Issues relating to theological diversity have been part of the church's life for some time. These issues come to the surface at certain times, but more often they are implicit in conflicts which center on other issues. The work of the task force is one important way in which the church can deal openly with this reality.

I. REALITIES

A. *The Church Is Diverse*

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is properly concerned with issues of pluralism within the community of faith. The *Book of Order* evidences our struggle to create a genuinely inclusive church which encompasses all of God's people without regard to race, ethnic origin, gender, class, and age distinctions. Committees on Representation work at all levels of the church to ensure fair and effective participation in the decision making of governing bodies.

Beneath the surface of our commitment to inclusiveness, however, is the continuing issue of theological diversity. Whether this diversity in theological perspectives is characterized along vague lines (liberal-conservative, evangelical-liberationist, concerned-indifferent) or focused on specific issues (Scripture, Christology, the meaning of salvation) Presbyterians are a diverse lot. Not only are we a theologically diverse church, we are also diverse in our evaluation of diversity! Some see the broad range of theological convictions as one of the glories of the Presbyterian Church while others are convinced that theological diversity will lead to the decline of the denomination.

Even so, discussion of theological diversity within the Presbyterian Church usually takes place at a (surprisingly?) general level. While some celebrate and some rue the reality of our diversity, we seldom address directly the issues which distinguish us from one another. Theological discussion is sporadic at best. Whether at General Assembly, synod, presbytery, or congregational levels, the quality of our theological discourse is undistinguished. Again, some are content with this and others are disturbed by it. Nevertheless, whatever our theological concerns may be, we seem to deal with them by reverting to our polity, as if rewording ordination vows or citing "definitive guidance" really address the theological differences which underlie our debates.

At an even deeper level, our talk about theological diversity is an exercise in self-deception. Most of the talk about theological differences takes place within the church's white majority. Largely invisible is the issue of distinct theological perspectives which arise out of the experience of racial

ethnic minorities within the Presbyterian Church. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is a predominantly white middle-class denomination. While it may be said that justice issues arising out of the experiences of racial-ethnic minorities have been addressed by the church, the same cannot be said of theological perspectives arising out of those experiences. How aware are white majority Presbyterians of theological insights which grow out of the historical and cultural experiences of Native Americans, Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians within the Christian community generally and the Presbyterian community in particular?

Native American Christians deal with theological themes such as the land, human community, and the sovereignty of God in ways which are distinct from the treatment of those themes by European-American Christians. Yet the majority church is largely unaware of the potential for enrichment of biblical, theological, and ethical stances which Native American perspectives provide.

Black Christians have a history which leads to unique insights into themes of suffering, liberation, worship, and the interaction of theology and cultures. These insights are neglected by the majority church, however. Even when a major theme of Black theology—liberation—is addressed by the majority church, it is likely to be with reference to the struggles of the poor in Latin America rather than with reference to the experiences of Blacks in the United States.

Asian Christians bring distinct concerns to bear on numerous theological themes, including family values, cultural heritage, suffering and dynamic spirituality in new pluralistic life situations. These viewpoints are often treated as curiosities by the majority church. Rarely do they inform the theological work of the whole church.

Hispanic Christians deal with the church's catholicity, its functions as family, and its sacramental life in unique ways. Realities of economic and political oppression and liberation are analyzed differently as well. To the extent that the majority church takes notice of these contributions, it is more likely to be with reference to Latin American theologians than to Hispanic American life and thought.

In short, the potentially enriching theological perspectives which exist within the life of racial ethnic minorities which are part of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) are, at best, peripheral to the theological life of the church. Thus, next to the common sense observation that we are a theologically diverse lot must be placed the recognition that we are not as diverse as we could be, for as a church we have failed to listen faithfully to theological wisdom which grows out of our cultural pluralism.

Not surprisingly, the theological concerns of Christian women are more widely known and more responsibly heard within the Presbyterian Church. While women must still struggle to confront the whole church with

feminist theological issues, they have been far more successful than the church's racial ethnic minorities in gaining a hearing for issues which arise out of women's experience. In part, this is due to the fact that women are the church's majority. Power considerations are not irrelevant, for while many women experience a lack of power in the church, the power of women to be heard far outstrips that of racial ethnic minorities. Women have succeeded in motivating the whole church to grapple with issues of theological language, sin, and community to an extent that is phenomenal in comparison with the lack of success experienced by the church's tiny racial ethnic constituencies. Even at this point it must be acknowledged that the church has dealt with feminist theological insights from a perspective developed by white women. The experience-based theological themes developed by Asian, Black, Hispanic, and Native American women are not fully known or appreciated. This lack is recognized by most feminist theologians.

Thus, the Presbyterian Church is theologically diverse but not as diverse as it imagines. The diversity of theological thought which arises out of racial ethnic contexts is largely unacknowledged and therefore not appropriated within the church's articulated theological tradition. The diversity of theological thought within the majority church is acknowledged—sometimes with gratitude, sometimes with loathing—but is seldom addressed directly. As a result, many within the church, ranging from evangelicals to racial ethnic minorities to charismatics to liberationists, experience the frustration of not having their theological concerns addressed seriously within the community of faith. Too often, what passes for theological discourse is little more than a stale exercise in caricature.

B. *The Church Has Always Been Diverse*

It may be a source of comfort (or despair) to recognize that theological diversity is not a modern phenomenon. The Presbyterian Church's Book of Confessions, itself an instance of theological diversity, yields an instructive insight from the Second Helvetic Confession:

We are reproached because there have been manifold dissensions and strife in our churches since they separated themselves from the Church of Rome, and therefore cannot be true churches . . . We know, to be sure, that the apostle said: 'God is not a God of confusion but of peace' (I Cor. 14:33), and, 'While there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh?' Yet we cannot deny that God was in the apostolic church and that it was a true church, even though there were wranglings and dissensions in it . . . And there have at all times been great contentions in the Church, and the most excellent teachers of the Church have differed among themselves about important matters without meanwhile the Church ceasing to be the Church because of these contentions. For thus it pleases God to use dissensions that arise in the Church to the glory of his name, to illustrate the truth, and in order that those who are in the right might be manifest (I Cor. 11:19). (*Book of Confessions* 5.133)

The confession declares that the church of the 16th century was theologically diverse, that the apostolic church was theologically diverse, and that it pleases God to use theological diversity to manifest the truth. Of course,

councils and confessions can err and so the Second Helvetic Confession's assertion of theological diversity in the Bible and the history of the church as well as its sanguine attitude toward theological diversity need not be taken as gospel truth. Indeed, it is precisely our task to think biblically, historically, and theologically about theological diversity.

Presbyterians confess that the Bible is "the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ" and "the only infallible guide to faith and practice" Yet the reality of the Bible is plural rather than singular. The Bible is a collection of witnesses and guides. The Protestant canon consists of sixty-six "books!" Biblical writings are diverse in origin, purpose, content, and expression, yet they are unified in one collection which functions in the church *as* Scripture. The very fact of the Bible is a fascinating instance of unity and diversity.

Even limiting our exploration to the New Testament, a collection of texts composed within a brief span of time, we are confronted with not one Gospel, but four; not one recitation of the faith, but numerous letters, sermons, and tracts addressed to different groups of believers in diverse circumstances by various authors. While we may affirm that these texts are complementary rather than contradictory, the fact remains that we are presented with a diversity of expression, not a unitary one. Imagine how different our understanding of Christian faith would be if the New Testament were confined to Luke, Acts, and Paul's letter to the Philippians.

Thankfully, the New Testament is not so confined. It contains within it four Gospels, letters of Peter and James as well as Paul, and the distinct perspectives of Hebrews and Revelation. The richness of this multiplicity can be illustrated by the very different ways in which the four Gospels treat the birth of Jesus.

Mark does not recount Jesus' birth at all. For Mark, "the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ" is the preparatory preaching of John the Baptist, Jesus' baptism, the wilderness temptations, and Jesus' programmatic proclamation, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel!" In contrast, Matthew and Luke are very interested in the nativity, although their interests are not identical. Only Luke recounts the announcement to the shepherds and their visit to the child. Luke's narrative of the poor, lowly outsiders signals his concern to proclaim the significance of Jesus Christ for all who are poor, powerless, and marginalized. On the other hand, only Matthew recounts the story of the Magi. Matthew's narrative of the search of Gentiles for the King of the Jews signals his concern to proclaim the universal significance of Jesus Christ for Jews *and* Gentiles. John's Gospel has no nativity narrative, beginning instead with a magnificent hymn proclaiming the glory of the Word made flesh.

As our Christmas celebrations show, Christians tend to blend all four Gospels into a unitary picture of nativity. Yet how much richer is our appreciation of the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ when we listen to four distinct voices. In diverse ways the evangelists bear witness to

God's solidarity with humankind in Jesus Christ. The very diversity of the witnesses is crucial to our understanding of that solidarity, however. While we may affirm that the four *different* perspectives on the beginning of the gospel are complementary, it remains the case that they are four different perspectives and that our appreciation of the event is diminished to the extent that we mute their diversity.

What unifies the various writings of Scripture and joins them together as canon is their consistent testimony to God's story with humankind, culminating in the story of Jesus Christ. Yet this story is told in a rich diversity of ways. The canon itself is testimony to the validity of theological diversity as it "canonizes" very different expressions of faith: Leviticus as well as Amos, James as well as Paul, Ecclesiastes as well as Isaiah, I and II Timothy as well as I and II Corinthians, Hebrews as well as Mark, and on and on. It remains to be seen how diverse this diversity really is and what limits there are to diversity; nevertheless it is clear that the sheer existence of the canon is testimony to the reality that no one perspective on the gracious faithfulness of God is sufficient to proclaim the fullness of the good news.

Diversity in theological thought throughout the history of the church hardly needs to be demonstrated. The most cursory reading of the history of the early centuries of the church reveals a wide range of competing theological convictions. Only a simplistic reading of this history would show a straight line development of orthodoxy, however. The motto of the "orthodox consensus"—that which has been believed "everywhere, always, by all [*ubique, semper, ab omnibus*]"—is appealing but exceedingly difficult to identify. It is not as if the church progressively weeded out heresies in order to arrive at a pure consensus of right faith, for even when Arianism, Montanism, Donatism, Pelagianism, and all the other heresies were removed, there remained a wide range of perspectives on a wide range of issues.

Similarly, diversity of theological thought during the Reformation period does not need to be demonstrated. The proliferation of churches and sects and the lively theological debate which occasioned it was an issue which occupied the Reformers, as the previously cited portion of the Second Helvetic Confession attests. What is intriguing is the attitude toward diversity which can be found in the thought of the Reformers.

Calvin clearly sets forth his conviction that a true church exists wherever the Word of God is purely preached and heard and the sacraments are administered according to Christ's institution. So central is this conviction for Calvin that he insists we cannot reject a particular church which retains these marks "even if it otherwise swarms with many faults:" (*Institutes*, Book IV, I.12.) Calvin does not stop here, however, for he readily acknowledges that even the marks themselves may be flawed. Some faults may well creep into either doctrine or sacraments, but this ought not estrange us from the communion of the church. "For not all articles of doctrine are of the same sort", says Calvin. "Some are necessary to know that they should be certain and unquestioned by all as the proper principles of

religion!” These, Calvin identifies, with disarming casualness, as: “God is one; Christ is God and the Son of God; our salvation rests in God’s mercy; and the like.” (Book IV, 1.12.) As for the rest, “Among the churches there are other articles of doctrine disputed which still do not break the unity of faith!” (Book IV, 1.12.) All should agree on all points, but “since all men are somewhat beclouded with ignorance, either we must leave no church remaining or we must condone delusion in those matters which can go unknown without harm to the sum of religion and without loss of salvation!” (Book IV, 1.12.)

This quick glance at the continuous reality of theological diversity within the church is not meant to settle any of the thorny questions about that diversity but merely to indicate that the present state of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is by no means unique. Theological diversity has been a reality in the church everywhere, always, among all.

C. *Challenges*

What seems to characterize the Presbyterian Church today is less its theological diversity than its avoidance of the challenges of that diversity. The view of Lefferts Loetscher in *The Broadening Church* seems as pertinent today as it did over thirty years ago: “And yet, memories and scars of the old fundamentalist-modernist controversy still largely inhibit among Presbyterians the frank and realistic discussion of theological questions which the times and the present opportunity call for. ‘The less theology the better’ seems to be the lurking implication—at least as far as the statistical growth of the church is concerned.” (156)

The irony is that unity in mission cannot be maintained apart from lively, faithful theological discourse. Thus, in the years since Loetscher’s analysis, the Presbyterian Church has seen its unity in mission (not to mention its “statistical growth”) crumble as assault after assault has been made on the programmatic and polity initiatives of the denomination. It is at least arguable that these assaults grow out of unaddressed theological perspectives. The church’s preference for “unity in mission” over “unity in theology” has led to unity in neither.

These preliminary observations have only been dealt with in general terms, and remain to be analyzed in detail. The paper must now proceed to examine carefully the issues of unity in diversity, diversity in unity, dynamics of unity and diversity, boundaries to diversity, and the realities within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Each of these issues will be considered biblically, historically, and theologically, with special reference to our denomination.

II. UNITY IN DIVERSITY

A. *Christian Community*

No amount of talk about diverse theological expression within the Christian community should be permitted to obscure the fact that it is diversity within *Christian* faith about which we are speaking. If any community is to be an identifiable community, there must be a focus of unity, a common bond embracing all members of the community. Thus, a central issue to be addressed is what makes Christian community Christian.

It is possible to identify a number of unifying elements for communities in general. Some communities are bound together by common geography, others by shared language. The unifying element for some communities is found in commonly affirmed propositions or values; for others it is found in shared ritual or collective action. While all of these possibilities and more can be actualized within particular Christian communities, none is sufficient to describe the unity of the whole Christian church—to identify what makes Christian community Christian.

Beneath geography and language, propositions and values, ritual and action, any discussion of the Christian community and its faith must begin with *the encounter between Jesus Christ and people*. The genesis of Christian faith can be located within a series of encounters between some Galilean Jews and Jesus of Nazareth. In Jesus' words and actions, parables and healings, people experienced a new thing which called them to turn toward God's coming reign. In encounter with Jesus of Nazareth, people experienced the present reality that God's reign was at hand. They turned toward that reality, trusting the good news.

Yet, the only reason we know of these encounters is the more basic encounter between people and this same Jesus who, after his execution, was raised from death. It was the joyous experience of a growing community of men and women that the crucified Jesus was now the risen Christ, present in the community. Were it not for this experience, the narratives of Jesus' life and death would be of little more than passing interest if, indeed, there were any narratives at all. Thus, the proclamation of the resurrection of the crucified one is far more than the mere recounting of one event within a string of events. It is the resurrection of the crucified Jesus and the encounter of this living one with people which transforms the narrative of life and death into a Christological narrative.

It is the resurrection which is the basis for understanding the Christian community. Yet it is not the resurrection as an isolated event which is at the heart of Christian faith. The biblical Gospels do not even recount the resurrection event itself. What they do recount are appearances of the risen Jesus with people. These appearances are more than audiovisual

demonstrations that the crucified Jesus now lives, although the identity of the resurrected one with the crucified one is essential. The resurrection appearances are encounters in which the lives of people are transformed. People found themselves in the presence of the crucified and risen one and thereby experienced themselves as people who were called into a new life and sent to proclaim that new life. Thus, within the New Testament itself, the reality of resurrection is displayed not only in narratives of resurrection appearances, but also in the continuity of the community of faith beyond the first eyewitnesses.

The risen Lord is known not only to those who saw him, but also to those who had not seen him. Christ “. . . appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve. Then he appeared to more than 500 brothers and sisters at one time . . . Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all . . . he appeared to [Paul].” (Not to mention that he appeared first of all to Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome [Mk. 16:1]) Yet, while appearances of the risen one were limited, encounter with the risen one is not limited. It is not as if those who came after the eyewitnesses have only a secondhand experience of the risen Christ. The witness of the eyewitnesses is far more than a recitation of a past event, and those who hear the witness of the eyewitnesses are invited to do far more than acknowledge the factuality of a past event. Within the Christian community, resurrection is the reality of the risen one who is present now among people. The Christian community came to be in encounter with the crucified and risen one and the Christian community continues to be in encounter with the crucified and risen one. The church is that community of women and men which is called by the crucified and risen Jesus to live new life in his presence, bearing witness to the good news.

Within the New Testament every single writing is concerned to express the reality of that encounter. From letters to gospels to apocalypse, the various New Testament texts are bound together in bearing witness to the experience of God’s gift of new life in the Spirit given in and through Jesus Christ. Of course it is true that the writings of the New Testament express their witness in diverse ways. That is not surprising since the one Jesus Christ was encountered by Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free people, men and women, in Jerusalem, Antioch, Corinth, and Rome.

The formation of the Christian community at the Jewish festival of Pentecost is an event of unity in diversity. Pentecost is the reversal of Babel. The Tower of Babel is a story of human estrangement resulting from the confusion of languages, while Pentecost is the account of human unification experienced in linguistic understanding. Yet Pentecost does not mark the restoration of a common language. Rather, people from all over the world heard the disciples’ proclamation in their own native languages. Similarly, while the prophecy of Joel was fulfilled as the Spirit was poured out upon all flesh, the “all” are enumerated: sons and daughters, young and old, men and women. The universal outreach and the worldwide unity of

Christian community, so powerfully expressed at Pentecost, is the unity of diverse persons and groups.

Thus, every New Testament writing and every formulation within them is concerned with God's gift of new life in the Spirit experienced in and through the crucified and risen one. This is the unifying core. However, this unifying core was (and is) variously experienced and variously expressed. The unity of Christian community assures that diverse experience and expression have a focus and therefore can be shared, discussed, even argued about. We turn now to a brief exploration of this unifying core under the trinitarian rubric: Jesus Christ, New Life in the Spirit, Gift of God.

B. *Jesus Christ*

Unity depends upon common loyalty. For Christians the object of that loyalty is not a proposition or an institution, but the person of Jesus Christ. It is Jesus Christ who is the integrating center of diverse expressions of Christian faith. This Jesus Christ is known and experienced as the Jesus of history who is the exalted Lord.

The unifying witness of the New Testament to Jesus Christ is paramount. Nevertheless, the unifying witness is not unitary, as if Jesus Christ is presented in a static fashion which compels people to view him in an identical way. Throughout the New Testament, Jesus Christ is proclaimed as one whose presence elicits response from people. The response is not channeled into narrow confines, however. There is a remarkable openness to response so that persons who read the texts in the twentieth century are called to make their own response even as the persons in the original setting were called to respond. Although there are obvious differences in emphasis and tone among the Gospels, all relate a ministry of Jesus which is grounded in the faith of Israel and which is marked by teaching and healing—a ministry in which good news is proclaimed and wholeness is given. The revolutionary significance of Jesus' words and deeds is always present, but it is never compellingly obvious, as if all who heard and saw were immediately driven to acknowledge the presence of God's reign. The presence of Jesus called for decision; his words and deeds elicited response. What is true within the narratives remains true. Response is elicited now. Is the reign of God present in this Jesus? And if so, what is the shape of God's reign?

The necessity for response is apparent in the miracle accounts. The decision to be made is not about the possibility of the miraculous but about the one who performs the miracles. This is especially clear in Matthew's account of the healing of a "blind and mute demoniac" in Matthew 12:22-28. A man who could neither see nor speak is brought to Jesus. With a dramatic economy of words Matthew states simply, "And he healed him." What is the reaction to this wonder-filled miracle? There are two responses. Some people ask the question, "Can this be the Son of David?" Their response is not a declaration of faith — "This is the Son of David" — but a question. Others

have a quite different reaction, however, and theirs *is* a declaration: “It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons.” Here, as throughout the Gospels, it is impossible not to respond. Do Jesus’ actions open up God’s way in the world? Or do they present a mistaken picture of God’s reign; or worse, a deceitful picture? While the negative response is set forth plainly, the positive response is only hinted at, and no single correct response is laid out.

Jesus’ parables are also occasions for decision. Many of the parables are stories which present the inbreaking of God’s way into the ways of the world. They operate within the outlines of everyday reality *as* we are confronted with laborers, bosses, merchants, neighbors, and other familiar figures. Yet into the midst of everydayness, a jarring element is introduced that compels our attention. The jarring note is God’s way in the world. Can these claims about God’s reign be believed? Can we trust the one who proclaims this reign of God? Decision is required, yet once again the shape of that response is not given.

The Gospels proceed from narratives about the words and deeds of Jesus to extended narratives of his suffering and death. In agonizing detail the passion of Jesus is presented, not simply *as* the end of a teacher and healer but as the consequence and climax of his teaching and healing. It is the death of Jesus which illuminates what he said and what he did. The passion narratives are followed by shorter narratives of the resurrection appearances, ranging from Mark’s disturbingly open-ended account to the more fully developed accounts in Matthew, Luke, and John. The intention of all the gospels is clear on one central point: the risen one is the one who spoke and acted and was crucified. This is the unified witness of the gospels. What is to be the response to this one reality? Once again, no one response is set forth. Rather, a range of responses is presented: fear (Mk. 16:8), fear and joy (Mt. 28:8), worship (Mt. 28:9), lies and bribery (Mt. 28:12-15), hesitant doubt (Mt. 28: 17), proclamation (Lk. 24:8-10), disbelief and ridicule (Lk. 24:11), amazement (Lk. 24:12), recognition in the breaking of bread (Lk.24: 30-32), terror (Lk. 24:37), doubt again (Lk. 24:38), inability to believe in the face of joy and wonder (Lk. 24:40), understanding (Lk. 24:45), demand for proof (John 20:25), declaration of love (John 21:15-17). The narratives elicit response to the reality of the crucified and risen one, but they do not confine that response, nor do they define only one faithful response.

Outside of the gospels, New Testament attention is less on the ministry of Jesus than on the presence of the risen Christ in the community. As in the gospels, the identity of the crucified and risen one remains paramount. Paul may assert that “even though we once regarded Christ from a human point of view, we regard him thus no longer” (II Cor. 5:16), yet even here the identity between the human one and the exalted one is clear. Paul’s use of the “Christ hymn” in Philippians 2:6-11 is a bold statement that the one who “emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness:” is the very one whom “God exalted” and upon whom God

“bestowed the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow . . . and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord!” In Revelation, the one who is worthy to open the scroll is the exalted Lamb, yet the Lamb stands in the midst of heaven “as though it had been slain!”

Wherever we look in the New Testament—whether at gospels or letters, at confessional formulas, worship, proclamation, or mission—the unifying reality is that the man Jesus and Christ the Lord are one. It is this central unifying affirmation which shapes Christian faith in all its diversity, marking it off from any other expression of religious experience. As we shall see, this unity —Jesus Christ—is given diverse expression, even within the New Testament. Nevertheless, the central affirmation is clear.

There is evidence within the New Testament of the struggle to maintain the essential continuity between the Jesus of history and the risen Christ present within the community of faith. Unbalanced emphasis on Jesus the man approved by God does not emerge as a problem only in the post-apostolic church. Already in Hebrews we can see an explicit attempt to counter over-emphasis on the Jesus of history by asserting Jesus’ superiority over angels, Moses, and all priests. Jesus Christ is more than messenger, prophet, or priest; Jesus Christ is the Son of God who “reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature” and who “when he had made purification for sins . . . sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high!” (Heb. 1:3.) Similarly, an unbalanced emphasis on Jesus the divine one who only appeared human is not a new problem in the postapostolic church. Already in the Johannine epistles we are warned that “many deceivers have gone out into the world, men who will not acknowledge the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh!” (II John 7.) It is asserted that we can know the whole truth by acknowledging that “every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God!” (I John 4:2, 3.) This struggle within the New Testament to maintain the unity Jesus Christ is evidence of that unity’s centrality. In the midst of diverse testimony growing out of diverse experience, the unified and unifying reality is the identity of the crucified Jesus and the risen Christ.

While it would be impossible to survey the history of theology throughout the centuries of the church it is clear that the unity of the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ is maintained throughout. The maintenance of this unity was not a simple matter. For example, the church had to struggle with the challenges of adoptionism and docetism, it had to work through the implications of logos christology, and it had to cope with the sophisticated options of the monarchianists and the Arians. Nevertheless, although the church’s commitment to the unity *Jesus Christ* could never be taken for granted, and although that commitment assumed diverse forms as diverse issues arose, the essential unity was preserved. The ecumenical creeds conserve the biblical testimony that the same Jesus Christ was crucified under Pontius Pilate and rose from the dead. Even when the issues later shifted to disputes

about the “two natures” of Jesus Christ and the trinitarian relationships, the identity of the crucified and risen one was maintained. The crucified one is the risen one; the risen one is the crucified one. To split this reality is to deal a death blow to Christian faith.

The church’s christological concern has often tended to concentrate on incarnation rather than crucifixion-resurrection; that is, on the question of the “divine and human natures” rather than on the unity of the crucified and risen one. However, this may be testimony to the givenness of the latter. Whenever the church turned toward the issue of crucifixion-resurrection, its testimony was firm:

We believe and teach that the same Jesus Christ our Lord, in his true flesh in which he was crucified and died, rose again from the dead, and that not another flesh was raised other than the one buried, or that a spirit was taken up instead of the flesh, but that he retained his true body.

— The Second Helvetic Confession (5.073)

C. *New Life in the Spirit*

The encounter with the crucified and risen Christ occasioned a radical difference in the lives of believers. In Jesus Christ God’s way in the world was manifest, and this way took root in the lives of people. Decisive faith in Jesus Christ meant new possibilities, and although these new possibilities are expressed in a wide range of images they combine to express a reality which is so radically discontinuous with what had gone before that it is called new life.

It would be impossible to encapsulate or summarize the New Testament witness to new life, but it can be said that it is a shared experience, an experience of new community. What is present with all is “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and participation in the Holy Spirit” (II Cor. 13:14.) That this shared life in the Spirit is fundamental to the unity of Christian community can be seen clearly in the universal Christian experience of baptism. Encounter with Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, is expressed in baptism where “we were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:4.) Baptismal solidarity with Jesus Christ is also solidarity with brothers and sisters in a new community of the Spirit. The unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace means that “there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all who is above all and through all and in all!” (Eph. 4:4-6)

The radical newness of life in the Spirit is shown in two significant texts. Paul proclaims that “by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and all are made to drink of one Spirit!” (II Cor. 12:13.) Or again, “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. “

(Gal. 3:27, 28) The proclaimed reality of Christian community is that all divisions of religion and race, nationality, class, gender, and status are rendered irrelevant in the face of common experience. Surely it is not going too far to refer to communal experience in the Spirit of Christ as an experience of radical unity in diversity.

No wonder, then, that this new communal reality is spoken of in terms of “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control”—the fruits of the Spirit. Insofar as the fruits of the Spirit can be taken as expression of the new life, it must be noted that it is not private goodness but rather the fulfillment of communal relationships. One does not love alone; love is a quality of relationship. Solitary joy is not joy at all; joy is an expression of human interaction. Peace is not lonely, quiet calm; peace is harmony and wholeness in relationships. Can one be kind in isolation from others? Is faithfulness a quality of isolation? The fruit of the Spirit is the gift of true community and the possibility of growth in true community.

Just as new life in the Spirit means transformed relationships within community, so it also means transformed purpose—life as service (*diakonia*). Following Ephesians’ proclamation of “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all” a diversity of gifts is noted. All of these diverse gifts are for the purpose of equipping the saints “for the work of ministry (*diakonia*) until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God!” (Eph. 4:12, 13) The community’s service, given in the Spirit of the one who came not to be served but to serve, is itself a service of proclaiming new life so that new community will widen and deepen. The old has passed away and the new has come, for God has “reconciled us to himself” through Christ, and given us “the ministry (*diakonia*) of reconciliation!” (II Cor. 5:19.) The community is entrusted with the message of reconciliation —reconciliation between God and humankind, and reconciliation among people.

Clearly the community’s service took diverse forms. “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service (*diakonia*) but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one” (I Cor. 12:4-6) Paul mentions at least thirteen different Spirit-given forms of service: speaking wisdom, speaking knowledge, faith, healing, working miracles, prophecy, distinguishing between spirits, various tongues, interpretation of tongues, apostleship, teaching, helping, and administering. If we add to this list the gifts mentioned in Romans 12 we can come up with at least five more: serving, exhorting, contributing, giving aid, and doing acts of mercy. Even this extensive list does not exhaust Spirit-given service, however, for Paul does not provide a complete catalog, but only a gathering of examples.

While Spirit-given forms of service are apportioned among believers, they are given “for the common good.” Service is given primarily to the community. Of course the gifts are distributed among individuals, but since they are

given for the common good, it is clear that it is the church that is gifted by means of its individual members. The purpose of all gifts is service, and the purpose of service is to further the good of the whole community of faith and, by extension, the whole world through the mission and ministry of the church.

New life in the Spirit assumed diverse forms even within the New Testament churches as the letters of Paul readily attest. From Galatia to Corinth to Rome, a diversity of experience led to a diversity in formulations of the new life even as the reality of new life remained central. What is true among the New Testament churches remains true throughout the subsequent history of the church.

To attempt a survey of new life in the Spirit through the centuries of the church's history would be foolhardy. Nevertheless, the centrality of new life as a source of unity can be indicated by reference to a fascinating controversy which occupied the church for several centuries. The Donatists were purists who raised many challenges to the church, but the central question had to do with the connection between grace and perfection, between the unity and holiness of the church. The Donatists made the unity of the church contingent upon its purity, therefore demanding that the church be purged of priests and bishops who had committed any immorality, especially that of betraying the faith under persecution. They went so far as to assert that anyone who received the sacraments from an imperfect priest or bishop was impure and should be purged. Not surprisingly, the Donatists believed that they alone were the true church. They therefore separated themselves from the body of catholic Christians.

Among those who did battle with the Donatists was Augustine. Augustine did not deny that sin was harmful to the church. Nevertheless, he insisted that unity grew from God's grace and was not dependent upon human purity. What most threatened the church was not immorality or even apostasy but schism! New life in the Spirit is a gracious reality for the whole community of faith; grace is the foundation of unity in community.

Calvin noted with approval Augustine's opposition to the Donatists, for he was aware that the Donatist spirit was prevalent in the 16th century:

There have always been those who, imbued with a false conviction of their own perfect sanctity, as if they had already become a sort of airy spirits, spurned association with all men in whom they discover any remnant of human nature ... Indeed, because they think no church exists where there are not perfect purity and integrity of life, they depart out of hatred and wickedness from the lawful church, while they fancy themselves turning aside from the faction of the wicked. (Book IV, I.13)

Calvin, like Augustine before him, saw the church's unity in the grace of God.

All the elect are so united in Christ that as they are dependent on one Head, they also grow together into one body ... They are made truly one since they live together in one faith, hope, and love, and in the same Spirit of God. (Book IV. I.2.)

“Donatist” demands for purity are no less in evidence in the contemporary church than in the church of Augustine’s or Calvin’s day. Yet the witness of the Scriptures, the church’s reformers, and the ongoing life of the whole church combine to affirm that new life in the Spirit is a gracious bond of unity.

The church has understood new life in the Spirit in a multitude of ways throughout its history, yet it has always affirmed that salvation results in a new mode of life which takes shape in community:

The new life takes shape in a community in which men [sic] know that God loves and accepts them in spite of what they are. They therefore accept themselves and love others, knowing that no man [sic] has any ground on which to stand except God’s grace.

— The Confession of 1967 (9.22)

D. *Gift of God*

New life in the Spirit, given in and through Jesus Christ, is a gift of God. The New Testament is unified in its testimony that new life is neither an outgrowth of human potential nor a necessity of history. All comes from God as gracious gift.

Paul’s letter to the Romans was written to a community divided into Jewish Christian and Gentile-Christian elements. The lengthy explication of the gospel of God which is found in Paul’s introduction to the letter (Rom. 1:1-7) is rich in meaning, but three crucial elements stand out. First, Paul stresses the continuity between promise and fulfillment:

What the faithful God had promised in covenant has now been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Second, Paul underlines the continuity between the Jesus of history and the risen Christ: The one who was descended from David according to the flesh is Son of God in power by his resurrection. Finally, Paul identifies the purpose of his apostleship (and of the letter): to bring the obedience of faith for the sake of Christ’s name among all.

Flowing from this gospel of God is a lengthy indictment of both Gentile-Christian and Jewish-Christian “ways to God!” The indictment concludes with the declaration that “none is righteous” and that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God!” (Rom. 3:10, 23.) Neither Gentile potential nor Jewish history is a golden path which leads to new life. New life is God’s gracious gift for all which unites all, in a community of new life.

New life in the Spirit is not a potential inherent in human life. Whatever knowledge of God may be available in human existence is not knowledge of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who acts in the world to bring about wholeness. Even at their best, the potentials inherent in human life “suppress the truth” for they do not lead to honoring God or giving thanks to God. Instead, they lead to claims of human wisdom as the glory of God is exchanged for cheap imitations. (Rom. 1:18–23.)

New life in the Spirit is not an inevitable outgrowth of history. Israel was “entrusted with the oracles of God” (Rom. 3:2) and “to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises!” (Rom 9:4, 5.) Yet even those who are the heirs of history cannot rely on historical inevitability and so are no better off than the Gentiles. There is no distinction.

New life in the Spirit is God’s gracious gift to all. All who “receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life” through Jesus Christ. (Rom. 5:17.) It is no accident that “grace and peace” is the standard New Testament greeting, for God’s gift and the wholeness of new life are inextricably linked. The community of faith is unified in the experience of receiving new life as gift from God. Those who have opened themselves to the gift are no longer strangers to one another, but are “fellow citizens” and “members of the household of God.” (Eph. 2:19.)

Once again, it would be useless to attempt to trace the trajectory of grace throughout the church’s history. Yet, once again, the centrality of the conviction that the new life in the Spirit is a gift of God given in and through Jesus Christ can be illustrated through Augustine, this time in his dispute with the Pelagians. Pelagius and his followers held that humans have the capacity to achieve sinless perfection in this life without God’s grace. Pelagius asserted that while the grace given to all of God’s creatures made moral perfection a possibility, it was the freely determined willing and acting of people that made perfection a reality. For Augustine, on the other hand, all was grace. It is through God’s grace that human beings have knowledge of the good, the capacity to will the good, and the ability to do the good. Perfection is not possible without God’s grace, said Augustine, and even with God’s grace perfection remains a goal of this life rather than an achievement.

Pelagianism was condemned as a heresy in the 5th century, but this did not mean that the church endorsed Augustine’s notions of predestination or the irresistibility of grace. Nevertheless, the debates which continue to the present time all begin from the starting point of grace, God’s gift of new life in the Spirit given in and through Jesus Christ. Augustine and Pelagius are two poles between which the church moves. When the church comes closest to Augustine it proclaims predestinarian views of God’s grace; when the church comes closest to Pelagius it proclaims the capacity of human faith. Nevertheless, the church always proclaims that it is God’s gift which comes first. New life is never merely a human potential or an historical necessity.

The Church’s commission, upon which its freedom is founded, consists in delivering the message of the free grace of God to all people in Christ’s stead, and therefore in the ministry of his own Word and work through sermon and sacrament.

— The Theological Declaration of Barmen (8.27)

E. *God's Gift of New Life in the Spirit
Given in and Through Jesus Christ*

The foregoing expression of the unity of Christian faith is an abstraction. Indeed, any discussion of the unity that makes Christian faith Christian is an abstraction, for Christian faith is lived out in real communities of faith by real people. In the words of the French maxim, "*La theorie c'est bon, mais ca n'empêche pas d'exister*—Theory is fine, but it doesn't prevent things from existing!" The theoretical construct, "God's gift of new life in the Spirit" given in and through Jesus Christ may (or may not be) an adequate expression of theological unity, but it is an expression which is articulated in diverse ways in the experience of diverse communities of faith. We may be able to discern unity in diversity but we must also acknowledge the reality of diversity in unity. It is to this that we now turn.

III. DIVERSITY IN UNITY

A. *Diverse Experience, Diverse Expressions*

No amount of talk about the unity of theological expression within the Christian community should be permitted to obscure the fact that even core affirmations of Christian faith are expressed in a rich diversity of ways. If a community is to be a human community, there will be a range of experiences and expressions within the common bond which embraces all members of the community. Thus, a central issue to be addressed is the amazing diversity which characterizes Christian faith from the New Testament to the present day.

Our discussion thus far has focused on the New Testament. Christian scriptures embrace the Old Testament as well as the New Testament, of course, and an overview of the Hebrew Scriptures will provide an entry point for our discussion of theological diversity within theological unity.

It is possible to identify a number of themes which are consistently addressed in the Old Testament. One recent attempt, John Goldingay's *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament*, sets forth a listing of such recurring themes: people of God, the contexts or forms by which God and his people relate, monarchy, Law, Israel's future with Yahweh, response to God, and God's commitment to Israel. What is striking, however, is less the consistency of these themes than the diversity of perspectives on these themes.

The people of God is a main focus of the Old Testament, yet the people of God is conceived in various Old Testament writings as a family clan, a theocratic nation, an institutional state, an afflicted remnant, and a religious community.

God's covenant relationship with the people of God is another consistent theme which is expressed in a broad range of ways: promise between Yahweh and patriarchal clan leader, relationship of commitment between Yahweh and liberated slaves, a special relationship between Yahweh and the Israelite King, and a relationship not yet actual but dependent upon new acts of Yahweh.

Monarchy is radically rejected in one strand of the Old Testament, accepted with qualifications in another, accepted wholeheartedly in yet another, and accepted as a future hope in still another.

Is the Law the God-given means of expressing commitment to Yahweh, the seal of Israel's relationship with Yahweh, the threat of judgment, the means of avoiding judgment, or the explanation of judgment? It is all of these in different strands of the Old Testament.

Israel's future with Yahweh is seen in terms of human decision and action or as the bestowing of redemption from exile or as a divine transformation of people-land-temple or as a new order beyond history. The Day of Yahweh may be seen as blessing or terror and may be distant, near, present, or past.

Different strands of the Old Testament reveal diverse understandings of the proper **response to God**. In the patriarchal stories it is trustful following of God's promise, while in Exodus-Deuteronomy it is detailed subordination of all of life to Yahweh. The Psalms are concerned with personal and communal prayer and praise while the preexilic prophets stress justice and faithfulness to the virtual exclusion of temple worship. Wisdom literature is interested in the judicious living of everyday life, but the prophets urge reliance upon Yahweh rather than worldly wisdom.

God's commitment to Israel is sometimes expressed as unqualified and permanent, at other times it is seen as conditional. At times it is viewed in exclusivist terms, at others in universal terms.

Other themes which are addressed throughout the Old Testament could be set forth—**Creation, Abraham, Exodus, Zion**—but the result will always be the same: consistent themes are dealt with in diverse ways. No attempts at harmonizing could (or should) homogenize the rich diversity of Old Testament faith into a thin gruel of abstraction. Of course it can be said that diverse viewpoints in the Old Testament grow out of different historical periods, different contexts, different questions. And that is precisely the point.

Although Israel always understood itself to be Yahweh's people, it was inevitable that this self-understanding would assume diverse forms in different contexts. To be Yahweh's people meant one thing when Israel was a loose confederation of tribes and quite another thing when Israel was a unified nation. What it meant to be Yahweh's people had to be radically re-thought in Babylonian exile, re-thought again when Israel returned to the land, and re-

thought yet again when Israel found itself under the Roman heel. Monarchy meant one thing when Israel had a king; it could not mean the same thing when Israel was without its own earthly rulers.

Thus, while there is unity in the enduring themes of Israel's faith, there is diversity in the manner these themes are understood in varying contexts. Even within distinct periods of Israel's history, diverse understandings of faith and life characterized Israel's thought. The concrete experience of Israel shaped its questions and its answers, for the encounter between Yahweh and Israel was never an abstract proposition; it was always actual encounter in actual circumstances.

The same is true of the New Testament. Surely all of the New Testament writings bear witness to God's gift of new life in the Spirit given in and through Jesus Christ. Yet this new life was experienced by different people: Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free, men and women. It would be astonishing if the experience of salvation by different people had been an identical experience, identically expressed. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. But the people who are encountered by Jesus Christ were very different in all of the yesterdays, are very different in all the places today, and will be very different in all of the unknown tomorrows. No one experience, no one expression of experiences is sufficient to capture the totality of what God has done in Jesus Christ. To say this is not to make a concession to "pluralism." Rather, it is to celebrate the glory of God.

B. *Jesus Christ*

How did the earliest Christians confess their faith in Jesus Christ? Scholars have identified several confessional formulas in the New Testament: Jesus is Son of Man, Jesus is Messiah, Jesus is Son of God, Jesus is Lord. These "confessions of faith" arose in distinct situations which called for the earliest Christians to express in a concise form the central element in their new faith. Critical examination of these confessional formulas is a complicated business but, for our purposes, we can make some general observations about two of them: Jesus is Messiah and Jesus is Lord.

"Jesus is Messiah" is prominent in the Synoptic Gospels (e.g., Mark 8:29, par.), in Acts (e.g., 5:42), and in John (e.g., 1:41). It is not necessary to trace the complex traditions of Jewish messianic hope nor is it necessary to elaborate the Christian redefinition of "Messiah" in terms of Jesus' suffering and death in order to make the point that this confession had particular relevance within Jewish and Jewish-Christian contexts. The Pauline letters, in which "Christ" functions less as a confession than as a proper name for Jesus, are evidence that the confession "Jesus is Messiah (Christ)" had far less relevance within Gentile and Gentile-Christian contexts. What was a living hope for Jews, fulfilled in a surprising new way in Jesus, was simply not a part of Gentile hope. Thus, it is not surprising that "Jesus is Messiah" corresponded particularly to the experience of Jewish-Christians.

“Jesus is Lord” was undoubtedly the principal confession of faith for Paul and the Pauline churches. It was a central affirmation of Paul’s proclamation (e.g., II Cor. 4:5), the basic conversion affirmation (e.g., Rom. 10:9), the distinguishing mark of the gift of the Spirit (e.g., I Cor. 12:3), and the climactic expression of worship (e.g., Phil. 2:11). As a confession of faith (distinct from “Lord” as a form of address in the Synoptics), “Jesus is Lord” grew out of the resurrection faith of the early church. Jesus is Lord by virtue of his resurrection and exaltation. The designation of the risen Jesus as Lord had particular relevance to the experience of Gentile-Christians since *Kyrios* was the translation of the divine name of Yahweh in Greek versions of the Old Testament, and since *Kyrios* was a term familiar within mystery religions and developing emperor worship. *Kyrios* was an affirmation that Jesus (not Isis or Serapis or Caesar) is Lord.

While “Messiah” was a concise expression of Jewish-Christian experience of the reality of Jesus Christ, it was not part of the tradition or hope of Gentile-Christians. Similarly, while “Lord” expressed well the Gentile-Christian experience of the reality of Jesus Christ it was a term with limited significance for Jewish-Christians. Both confessional formulas express the experienced significance of the crucified and exalted one, but neither the experience nor the expression is identical. One had special reference to the fulfilled hope of the Jews while the other had special reference to the present experience and future hope of Gentile-Christians. This is not to suggest that the confessions are mutually exclusive, without points of contact. It is only to show that they were appropriate expressions of faith in two distinct settings. Each was the most relevant and meaningful confession within a particular faith community. It should also be noted that a confession framed in one context did not remain the same when transmitted into a new context; witness the change from “Messiah” as Jewish-Christian confession to “Christ” as proper name in the Gentile-Christian communities. New situations call forth new confessions of faith.

This may become clear by noting that the most commonly used confessional formula in the contemporary Presbyterian Church—“Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior”—is rare in the New Testament. This modern formulation embodies “Jesus is Messiah” in the modified form of Christ as a proper name; a central New Testament confession, “Jesus is Lord;” and a biblically infrequent confession, “Jesus is Savior.” (Of the twenty-four New Testament uses of *soter*—savior—fully one third are applied to God, not Jesus, and in only four instances is the particular combination Jesus-Christ-Lord-Savior employed: Philippians 3:20; II Peter 1:11; 2:20; 3:18.)

Does the fact that “Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior” is not a central confession of faith in the New Testament mean that it is an inappropriate confessional formula today? Of course not. But does “Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior” mean precisely the same thing as the central New Testament confessional formulas? Again, of course not. To confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is to affirm something different from “Jesus is Messiah” or

“Jesus is Lord.” The contemporary confession may be considered a more comprehensive one, but the difference is real. New situations, new contexts, new questions, call forth new confessions. In fact, if Christian communities had not developed new language in new situations, they would have failed to confess their faith to the real world.

To shift from New Testament confessional formulas to less concisely defined expressions of faith is to illustrate the richness of diverse perspectives on the one Jesus Christ. A recent study by Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries*, discusses eighteen metaphors which express the significance of Jesus for different periods of history. Clearly, seeing Jesus as Teacher is not the same as viewing Jesus as Liberator. King of Kings is not the same as Bridegroom of the Soul. Different perspectives on the same crucified and risen one grow out of different contexts and express faith to different contexts.

Whatever the christological concern, communities of faith in diverse times and places have experienced and expressed faith in diverse ways. Although some are more adequate than others, no theological formulation can say all there is to be said about Jesus Christ. Lamb, prophet, bread, shepherd, word, messiah, servant, king, second Adam, conqueror, priest, and many more are all metaphors which open up experiences of the one Jesus Christ. None alone can capture the fullness of human encounter with the crucified and risen one, nor can all together. Neither can all the metaphors be harmonized into a generalized picture. Each gives expression to the real experience of real people in encounter with the real Jesus Christ.

All of this may seem self-evident, but it is also self-evident that people tend to prefer the understanding of Jesus Christ which gives expression to their own experience. This is only natural. The problem arises when one group of people assumes its experience to be the only valid experience, exalting and universalizing its own expression of faith. Such exclusivity not only denigrates the faith of others; it also shuts off valid challenges and enrichments which may come from others.

For example, to affirm Jesus Christ as liberator may be natural for people who experience oppression. For them, traditions of exodus and new exodus are expressions of their hope for freedom from bondage. Jesus Christ as the one who leads people out of political and economic slavery corresponds to their experience in a way that it will not for people in power and people who benefit from existing power structures.

To affirm Jesus Christ as sacrifice for sin may be natural for people who are caught in a web of personal guilt. For them, biblical images of forgiveness and justification are expressions of their freedom from the power of sin. Jesus Christ as the one who bears the sins of the world corresponds to their experience in a way that it will not for people who understand forgiveness as only one aspect of the grace of Jesus Christ.

However, to claim that liberation is *the* correct category within which to understand Jesus Christ, or that forgiveness of sins is *the* correct category, is to denigrate both the experience of other Christians and the testimony of the New Testament. (On the other hand, to claim that both are really the same is to lose the vital connection of each to experience and to reduce the rich testimony of the New Testament to a dull sameness.) Unity of faith does not mean uniformity in faith.

C. *New Life in the Spirit*

Encounter with the crucified and risen Jesus Christ occasioned a radical difference in the lives of believers. This new life was a shared, communal experience, but it was not a uniform experience. The New Testament letters provide ample evidence that new life in Jesus Christ is experienced by different people in different ways.

Now there are varieties of gifts,
but the same Spirit;
and there are varieties of service,
but the same Lord;
and there are varieties of working,
but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one.
To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit
for the common good. (I Cor. 12:4–7.)

Paul's subtle treatments of the new life in I Corinthians 12 and Romans 12 present us with insights which are as crucial for us as they were for the Corinthians and Romans. Both of those communities of faith were divided into camps which exalted their own experiences of new life. "Is Christ divided?" Of course not, but Christ's people in Corinth and Rome were divided.

In Corinth, diverse experiences and expressions of new life in the Spirit were hardened into exclusive sub-communities. Diverse experiences and expressions produced quarrelling, party spirit, a fragmentation of the body of Christ. What does Paul say to the divided Corinthian community? He appeals for agreement and an end to dissension, to be sure, but the agreement he calls for is not one in which diverse experiences of the Spirit are quashed in favor of one monolithic expression. Rather, the agreement is one in which diverse experiences of the Spirit are to be cherished and respected as contributors to the common good. The problem in Corinth was not diversity; diversity was the gift of the Spirit. The problem was that the recipients of the Spirit's gifts exalted their own particular experience at the expense of others, thus perverting diversity by hardening it into division.

The Christian community in Rome was divided into Jewish-Christian and Gentile-Christian groups, probably leading to a number of separate house

churches. The two groups had come to faith in the one Jesus Christ out of very different backgrounds and so it is not surprising that their experiences of new life in the Spirit were different. Out of these diverse experiences grew an alienation which went so far as to make common worship problematic. Jewish Christians judged Gentile-Christians and found them wanting, perceiving them as people who were indifferent to the Law, unconcerned with right order, and ignorant of the persistent reality of sin. For their part, Gentile-Christians despised Jewish-Christians as weaklings in faith who had to rely on external traditions, patterns, and regulations rather than living freely in faith.

Paul's letter, written to bring about "the obedience of faith" among all in Rome, does not pull any punches. "On some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder;" says Paul. Boldly indeed, for he reminds both Jewish-Christians and Gentile-Christians of some crucial matters of faith and life: the righteousness of God, the gift of grace, justification by faith, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and more. And yet Paul does not direct either Jewish-Christians or Gentile-Christians to conform to the pattern of the other, nor does he set forth his own pattern of experience as the only correct one.

For Paul, the crucial issue for all Christians is faith, our relationship to Jesus Christ. "Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin," Paul asserts (Rom. 14:23). Which is to say that if one's faith in Jesus Christ leads to certain patterns of new life, those patterns of new life are to be respected, even valued, by those whose experience is different. On the other hand, convictions and patterns of life which proceed, not from faith, but from allegiance to tradition, culture, ideology, or class, are sin! But how can we know whether other people's convictions or patterns of life proceed from faith? That is often our question, but it is not the question Paul calls us to ask. Our task is to make sure that *our own* convictions and patterns proceed from faith (14:22) as we refrain from judging others (14:13). Rather than judge one another's diverse experiences of new life in the Spirit, we are to welcome one another (15:7). Our mutual welcoming is not for the purpose of "disputes over opinions" (14:1), but for the pursuit of "what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding" (14:19).

Diversity of experience is not exalted in the New Testament, as if difference is a goal to be sought. Diversity of experience is recognized as reality, however. Christians are encouraged to be of the same mind and to live in full accord. In the absence of improbable unanimity, however, Christians are encouraged to have the same love, not acting from selfishness or conceit, but in humility counting others better than themselves. Within the diversity of experiences of new life in the Spirit, the ground of unity remains Christ Jesus. "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared..."(I Cor. 15:3-4). "For if we have been united with [Christ] in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." (Rom. 6:5.)

It is Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen one, who is the ground and the pattern of unity within diversity.

D. *Gift of God*

Diversity of gifts is God's gift. So too, unity is God's gift. The little book of Jude provides an intriguing glimpse into a situation in which "diversity" has become the real problem of theological and ethical promiscuity. Jude writes about a clear and present danger in the church: "ungodly persons who pervert the grace of our God" (v.4). Although little is said about the precise nature of their sin, the acts of these ungodly persons are compared to notorious instances of disobedience in the Old Testament. It is said that they "defile the flesh, reject authority, and revile the glorious ones" (v.8). Jude does not warn about these sins in the world but in the church. The "ungodly persons" are those who take Christian faith and, through misunderstanding or malice, pervert it.

What is to be the response of the church to this danger in its midst? Jude answers by reminding the community of what happened to those who rebelled against God after their release from Egyptian bondage, what happened to rebellious angels, and what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah. In each instance, God judged and God executed judgment. Not even the archangel Michael presumed to pronounce a reviling judgment upon the devil, for judgment belongs to the Lord alone; rebuking is God's business. Jude *is* convinced that evildoers are like wisps of smoke, withered trees, waves dashed upon the rocks, stars wandering aimlessly in the void. Thus the faithful do not have to assume the task of rooting out and stamping out evil. God will do it. When legitimate, even welcome, diversity becomes unwelcome departure from faithfulness, God will act to preserve the gift of unity. God alone gives to the community of faith the unity in which it lives.

This does not mean that the church is to be indifferent to faithlessness or inactive in the presence of evil. The task of the faithful is not to assume God's position, however; the task of the faithful is to live faithfully. The church is to be aware of evil in its midst, for evil is a danger. Jude alerts the church, but proclaims that the response to "scoffers who set up divisions because they are devoid of the Spirit" is for the faithful to "build yourselves up on your most holy faith, pray in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God; wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ" (vss. 20, 21). The church, out of its own faithfulness, may convince some and rescue others. The task of the faithful is not to preserve the unity of faith by judging the faithless, however. Preservation of the church's unity in faith and life is God's gift.

E. *God's Gift of New Life in the Spirit Given in and Through Jesus Christ*

The preliminary principles of the Form of Government of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) state boldly

That truth is in order to goodness. That no opinion can be either more pernicious or more absurd than that which brings truth and falsehood upon a level, and represents it as of no consequence what a man's [sic] opinions are Otherwise it would be of no consequence either to discover truth or to embrace it. (G-1.0304.)

And yet the preliminary principles also state boldly that

... we also believe that there are truths and forms with respect to which men [sic] of good characters and principles may differ. And in all these we think it the duty both of private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other. (G-1.0305.)

Thus does the church state clearly what our brief examination of biblical and historical materials has shown. Unity and diversity are not polar opposites. Diversity does not destroy unity; unity does not destroy diversity. Rather, unity and diversity are complementary realities in the community of faith. The dynamics of unity and diversity within the church are subtle, however, and it is to an exploration of these dynamics that we now turn.

IV. DYNAMICS OF UNITY AND DIVERSITY

A. Two Cases

1. The Westminster Assembly

A fascinating point of entry into the dynamics of unity and diversity within the community of faith is provided by the dispute between the "Independents" and the "Presbyterians" in the Westminster Assembly. As the Assembly labored to produce a confession of faith and a form of church government for England, it experienced considerable unity in matters of doctrine and considerable diversity in matters of polity. As the "Great Debate Concerning Presbytery and Independency" revealed, however, doctrine and polity were not distinct issues. The dynamics of unity and diversity were at work in both doctrine and polity.

The issue between the Independents and the Presbyterians was whether the visible church is confined to a single congregation meeting in one place or whether it encompasses inter-congregational or supra-congregational organizations (such as a presbytery) which exercise authority over particular congregations. The lengthy debates over this issue may strike us as silly, concentrating as they did on issues such as the size of the New Testament church in Jerusalem. (Was the Jerusalem church small enough to meet in one place, thus proving the Independents' assertion of the visible church as a single congregation? Or was the church in Jerusalem too large to meet in one place, thus demonstrating the Presbyterians' assertion of the visible church as a larger unity embracing particular congregations?) The issue was not silly, however; it was a fundamental theological matter concerning the nature of the Christian Church.

The two positions did not develop in a vacuum. Diverse experiences played a prominent role in the development of different theological positions which

informed the debate. The Independents, having experienced the oppressions of ecclesiastical authority, were quite naturally opposed to a reconstituted hierarchy in the church. For Presbyterians on the other hand, it had been the presbyterial structure of the Church of Scotland which had enabled that church to cast off the yoke of king and bishops.

The debate between Independents and Presbyterians ran on for more than two years. In the end there was a breach between the two parties. It was not as though attempts were not made to bring the two sides together, however. George Gillespie, one of the Scottish commissioners to the Assembly addressed the Independents:

“O brethren, we shall be one in heaven; let us patch up differences in this place of our pilgrimage the best way we can. Nay, we will not despair of unity in this world:”

Gillespie concluded,

“I am persuaded, if there were but a right understanding of another’s intentions, the accommodation of which I speak would not be difficult ... I have in my eye that law of God, Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thy heart; thou shalt not in any wise rebuke thy neighbor, and thus suffer sin upon him. Faithful are the wounds of a friend. Therefore love the truth and peace. Yea, seek peace and pursue it”

Yet neither the Independents nor the Presbyterians placed peace and unity above their notions of truth. Each blamed the other for the impasse. In spite of this result, however, it should be noted that the deliberately inclusive composition of the Assembly, the seriousness of the debates, and the pleas for accommodation are evidences of the desire to treat diverse theological convictions with respect and to struggle for unity.

2. *The Adopting Act of 1729*

A somewhat different working through of the dynamics of unity and diversity can be seen in the differences which existed within American Presbyterianism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Presbyterians of English and New England Puritan background tended toward a more subjective, less authoritarian conception of Presbyterianism. In the eighteenth century this strand within the church was known as “New Side” and in the nineteenth century “New School.” Presbyterians of Scottish and Scotch-Irish background tended toward a more objective and more authoritarian conception, known in the eighteenth century as “Old Side” and in the 19th century as “Old School.”

This divergence within American Presbyterianism was evidenced in numerous issues over a long span of time. Particularly interesting is the 1720s discussion concerning the desirability of subscribing to a creed. Apprehensive over the possibility of theological innovation, some Presbyterians proposed that all ministers and candidates be required to subscribe to the Westminster Confession of Faith. Opponents of subscription saw it as unnecessary and divisive, substituting human words for the Word of God.

The result of the discussion was compromise. The Adopting Act of 1729 required a qualified subscription to the Westminster Confession, “as being in all the essential and necessary articles good forms of sound words and systems of Christian doctrine.” This conception of subscription as applying only to the Westminster Confession’s “essential and necessary articles” preserved the unity of the church while providing room for theological diversity and change.

As we shall see, the same compromise is embodied in the Presbyterian Church’s current version of subscription to “the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our Church.”

B. *The Challenge to Unity: The Temptation of Conscience*

The Christian community of faith is formed in ongoing encounter with Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Lord. This encounter is God’s gift which leads to new life in the Spirit. Since experiences of the formative event vary there are, inevitably, diverse expressions of that one reality. Surely there is only “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all.” But that unity is experienced by a vast variety of people, each of whom comes to encounter with the one Lord, each of whom expresses that encounter personally, each of whom becomes part of a particular community of faith, each of whom is placed within a fabric of relationships with other persons who have been encountered by the one Lord. The temptation of conscience is to take one’s particular experience and expression as the sole criterion of faith.

Our Preliminary Principles correctly state that “God alone is Lord of the conscience” and that therefore “we consider the rights of private judgment, in all matters that respect religion, as universal and unalienable.” (G-1.0301.) This principle is promulgated in order to protect the individual from coercion, however, not to exalt individual conscience as the standard of faith. The principle is a crucial safeguard which prevents the church from compelling persons to set aside their own experience and expression of Christian faith. The principle does not promote the individual conscience as the sole arbiter of truth.

Bearing witness to the truth as one sees it is not only permissible, it is to be encouraged as a mark of faithfulness to God and to the church. However, bearing witness to the truth as one sees it may have an ominous side. The conviction of conscience may lead one to regard oneself as the possessor of the truth without recognizing the inadequacy of one’s witness next to the universal revelation of the God who is the creator of heaven and earth. The grace of conscience can be perverted into the arrogance of dogmatism.

This arrogance may be confirmed by the discovery of the like-minded. Experience and expression of faith are always unique but they are not without points of contact with the experiences and expressions of others. Without such points of contact no community of faith would ever be possible. Within the

broad community of faith there are more compact communities of those whose experience and expression of faith are particularly compatible. These compact communities may be as broad as a tradition or a denomination, as narrow as a “party” within a denomination or a congregation. In any case, it is always possible that the compatibility of compact communities will lead to a group conscience which is strengthened in its arrogance by mutual confirmation.

Whether with individuals or, more commonly, with groups, it is but a short and disastrous step from the conviction that certain theological formulations of experience are right to the conviction that those formulations are the *only* right ones. From here it is an effortless slide into the suspicion that those whose formulations are different are so wrong that they are heretical or sub-Christian. The final insolence of conscience is that those who are different are not really Christian at all.

Exclusive certainty leads to isolation and schism. Such withdrawal cuts persons and groups off from sister and brother Christians, thereby depriving them of diverse experiences and expressions of God’s gift of new life in the Spirit given in and through Jesus Christ. Separation is far more than a practical matter of church politics. It is nothing less than a quenching of the Spirit, for we are all called to “respect those who labor among you . . . and to esteem them very highly in love. Be at peace among yourselves ... be patient with them all.” (I Thess. 5:12ff.)

The temptation of conscience knows no limitations within the church. It is as likely to be found among social activists as among fundamentalists. The temptation of conscience is a constant challenge to unity as partial experiences and expressions are exalted to the position of “gospel truth.” It is the delusion of conscience which functions in the community of faith as the peculiarly Protestant form of “excommunication,” in which the self-righteous withdraw from the church. Yet whether institutional unity is maintained or schism ensues, it is the temptation of conscience to assume the Lord’s prerogative of separating the sheep from the goats.

C. The Challenge to Diversity: The Temptation of Institutionalism

The Christian community of faith is formed in ongoing encounter with Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Lord. This encounter is God’s gift which leads to new life in the Spirit. Thus, while experiences and expressions of the formative event vary they all bear witness to a common reality. There is only “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all.” Persons and communities which experience and express that unity are bound together in a unified reality by their one Lord. The temptation of institutionalism is to give a privileged place to customary formulations and to the institution which bears them.

Our Preliminary Principles state that “every Christian church, or union or association of particular churches, is entitled to declare the terms

of admission into its communion.” (G-I.0302.) Furthermore, “for the preservation of both truth and duty ... it is incumbent upon [church] officers, and upon the whole church, in whose name they act, to censure or cast out the erroneous and scandalous . . .” (G.-1.0303.) These principles are crucial statements of the responsibility of the community of faith to bear corporate witness to one faith in its one Lord. The principles do not promote the majority corporate will as the sole criterion of faith, however.

Within any community of faith, whether a denomination or a congregation, there will be differences with regard to matters of faith and practice. It is the responsibility of those communities to develop convictions which are important to the whole people of God and to state those convictions clearly and boldly. The church’s corporate witness also has an ominous side, however. Corporate conviction, particularly when formulated within ecclesiastical-institutional contexts, may lead the church’s effective majority to regard itself as the possessor of truth without recognizing the legitimacy of claims to truth by theological minorities within the church and without recognizing the inadequacy of all claims to truth next to the universal revelation of the God who is creator of heaven and earth. Bearing witness to the unity of faith can lead to the assumption that customary-institutional formulations are the truth without regard for the rich diversity of apprehensions of The Truth, who is Jesus Christ.

It is but a short and disastrous step from the conviction that unity of faith is found in the community to the conviction that the institutional community is the locus of faith. From here the slide accelerates *as* concern for the needs of the institution predominates over the diverse experiences of Christians. Defense of the institution is equated with faithfulness to Christ.

Unity of faith which is institutionally expressed sees diverse experiences and expressions as threatening, and so attempts to ignore or suppress diversity. The temptation of institutionalism knows no limitations within the Christian community and can be found at denominational, congregational, and interest group levels. The only operative limitation on the temptation to institutionalism has to do with majority interests. The temptation of institutionalism is a constant challenge to diversity as customary experiences and expressions are exalted to the position of “gospel truth.”

The temptation to institutionalism can be illustrated by brief reference to the experience of Black Presbyterians. Gayraud Wilmore states the issue for the Black Church:

How can Black Christians use the history, culture, and experience of their historic struggle for freedom, something that is distinctively theirs, to enhance the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the manifestation of his power to transform not only Black humanity but the whole human race? (Wilmore, *Black and Presbyterian*, p.86.)

The issue is not only one for the Black church but also for the White Majority which has been content with the smug assumption that *its*

distinctive history, culture, and experience are normative. The Presbyterian Church's acquiescence in the institution of slavery during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is an outrageous reality. It is unpleasantly matched by contemporary Presbyterian indifference to Black worship and preaching, Black theological themes and ethical insights. The majority church's explicit commitment to social justice is matched by an implicit commitment to theological injustice, evidenced in a profound unwillingness to receive and appropriate the diversity available in the Black church.

What is true for Blacks is also true for Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans in the Presbyterian Church. But the tyranny of customary institutional experience and expression is not only directed against racial ethnic minorities. Within the white majority church, persons and groups at both the right and left ends of the theological spectrum often feel victimized by institutionalism. Their theological insights are marginalized by means of indifference or ridicule or hostility. Yet, in spite of the pain inflicted upon diverse communities of experience and expression within the larger community, it is generally a conventional faith and life which predominates. The dynamic of this conventional faith and life is to repress diversity when possible and confine it to conventional expression always.

D. *The Inseparability of Unity and Diversity*

The fourth of our preliminary principles states

That truth is in order to goodness . . . And that no opinion can be either more pernicious or more absurd than that which brings truth and falsehood upon a level, and represents it as of no consequence what a man's *[sic]* opinions are. (G-1.0304)

The fifth preliminary principle states that

. . . we also believe that there are truths and forms with respect to which men *[sic]* of good characters and principles may differ. And in all these we think it the duty of both private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other. (0-1.0305)

These two principles taken together illustrate the truth that unity and diversity in the community of faith are not polar opposites but rather complementary aspects of the reality of God's gift of new life in the Spirit given in and through Jesus Christ.

It has become fashionable recently to catalogue the dangers of "theological pluralism." Critics from both the right and the left as well as proponents of the role of Christian tradition and faith socialization have leveled attacks on the perceived commitment of mainline Protestant denominations to "pluralism." Some critics of "pluralism" rue the abandonment of the true faith; others set forth sophisticated analyses of individualism in matters of doctrine. These critics are surely correct if the "pluralism" they attack is nothing more than a *laissez-faire* conception

of Christian faith in which every person is the creator of a private religion. Such a “pluralism,” especially when exalted to the position of an ideology, undermines the possibility of genuine Christian community and cripples the church’s witness to the world.

Side by side with the recognition of “pluralism’s” dangers is a growing recognition of the dangers of enforced “unity.” Critics inside and outside of the Roman Catholic Church have expressed alarm at moves to limit dissent from official Catholic teaching by levying sanctions against theologians and bishops. Similarly, many have disapproved of the movement to enforce “unity” in the Southern Baptist Convention by limiting the rights of seminary professors to teach certain theological options. Again, the critics are surely correct if the “unity” they attack is nothing more than the result of power-laden suppressions of diversity. Such “unity” is an illusion which only serves to silence the expression of Christian conviction and limit the church’s witness to the world.

Neither diversity nor unity can be given the status of an ideology within the church. Neither can be promoted or enforced by resorting to compulsion. Unity and diversity are inseparable realities. Unity is found in God’s gift of new life in the Spirit given in and through Jesus Christ. Diversity is found in human experiences and expressions of that unifying reality. The existence of Christian *community* guarantees that faith in the one Jesus Christ will be diverse and that expressions of that faith (theology) will be even more diverse. Yet, because it is faith in Jesus Christ, it is guaranteed that diverse experiences and expressions will be of a common faith.

Those who celebrate “pluralism” in the church do so within the assumption that there is a basic unity in Christ. One would be hard pressed to find Presbyterians who desire a diversity so broad that it ceased to be identifiably Christian. Similarly, those who call for “unity” in the church’s faith do so within the assumption that there is a range of acceptable diversity. One would be hard pressed to find Presbyterians who desire that all Christians express faith in an identical way. Unity and diversity are not mutually exclusive alternatives within the community of faith. Unity and diversity are dynamic realities which exist in interrelationship.

Since unity is real and since diversity is not infinite, there must be some boundaries to diversity which serve to give shape to unity. It is to the issue of boundaries that we now turn.

V. THE BOUNDARIES OF DIVERSITY

A. The Necessity and Difficulty of Limits

Theological diversity is not limitless. There is a border beyond which the enriching of the church by diverse experiences and expressions becomes the impoverishment of a faith which is no longer identifiably Christian. There is

also a point at which plurality becomes theological promiscuity as openness to the new becomes an occasion for alien elements to enter into Christian faith and life.

To say that theological diversity is not limitless is only to state the obvious. Not all religious experience is *Christian* religious experience. One does not have to dismiss the other great world religions as delusions in order to affirm that Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Islam are not Christianity. Furthermore, not every religious expression that appropriates the label “Christian” is Christian. The New Testament itself bears witness to the reality that elements may be introduced into Christian faith which only serve to subvert the gospel. Thus, few argue that theological diversity is infinite. However, many argue about the nature of limits to diversity: What are the appropriate limits? How are limits to be articulated? In what ways should limits function within the community of faith?

The struggles within the Presbyterian Church in the early decades of the twentieth century are illustrative of the excruciatingly difficult task of speaking faithfully or sensibly about limits to diversity. In 1910, following a debate about the orthodoxy of certain candidates for ministry, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America identified five doctrines as “essential and necessary.” These were (1) the inerrancy of Scripture, (2) the virgin birth, (3) the sacrificial atonement, (4) the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and (5) Jesus’ miracles. The Assembly seemed to sense the list’s inadequacy, however, for immediately following the five points is the incongruous tagline, “others are equally so.”

The five-point doctrinal deliverance was reaffirmed by the General Assemblies of 1916 and 1923 in the face of repeated challenges, some of which were theological and some of which focused on the General Assembly’s authority to make declarations which proscribe the power of presbyteries. These challenges climaxed in the “Auburn Affirmation” of 1924. Over 1,200 Presbyterian ministers signed the “Auburn Affirmation,” declaring,

“Some of us regard the particular theories contained in the deliverance of the General Assembly of 1923 as satisfactory explanations of these facts and doctrines.

But we are united in believing that they are not the only theories allowed by the Scriptures and our standards as explanations of these facts and doctrines of our religion, and that all who hold to these facts and doctrines, whatever theories they may employ to explain them, are worthy of our confidence and fellowship.”

The ongoing controversy led to the appointment of a special commission of fifteen by the 1925 General Assembly. The commission was charged “. . . to study the present spiritual condition of our Church and the causes for unrest, and to report to the next General Assembly, to the end that the purity, peace, unity, and progress of the Church may be assured.” (*Minutes*, PCUSA, 1925, Part I, p. 88.) In a preliminary report to the 1926 General Assembly, the special commission stated that “. . . the Presbyterian system admits diversity of view where the core of truth is identical,” (*Minutes*, PCUSA, 1926, Part I, pages 62ff) while also making it clear that the *church*,

and not the individual, must decide the limits of acceptable diversity. In its final report to the 1927 General Assembly, however, the special commission held that the General Assembly had no right to declare “. . . that certain doctrines, when considered abstractly and logically, are essential and necessary to the system of doctrine contained in the Holy Scriptures.” (*Minutes*, PCUSA, 1927, Part I, page 81.) Thus, while the General Assembly’s right of judicial review was affirmed, its authority to issue binding doctrinal deliverances was denied. Surprisingly, the report of the special commission was “unanimously adopted without debate,” thus putting an end to the five-point deliverance of 1910, 1916, and 1923.

The issue of diversity’s limits persists and may be detected in the Presbyterian Church’s current ordination vows. Although the church’s confessional standard now consists of ten creedal statements—itsself evidence of diversity—ordinands are called to “. . . sincerely receive and adopt the *essential tenets* of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church . . .” [italics added]. There has been no formal identification of these essential tenets, of course, and informal attempts at identification by presbyteries have confused rather than clarified.

Although many in the contemporary church avow the necessity of clearly defined limits to diversity, the articulation of those limits and even the identification of crucial doctrines is varied. The variation *is* not a matter of competing definitions offered by theological “camps” for there is no consensus even within identifiable theological positions. The articulation of limits is as diverse within “evangelical” as within “liberal” constituencies. In short, many agree that there ought to be limits to diversity, but no one agrees on what those limits ought to be.

Given this reality, it seems foolhardy to attempt any talk about boundaries to diversity. Yet it may be possible to engage in an exploration of boundaries without presuming to produce a laundry list of “essential and necessary” doctrines.

B. *Christian Faith*

It is obvious that the clear sense in which Christian faith can be distinguished from the other great world religions is Christianity’s faith in Jesus Christ. Many religious traditions affirm belief in “God” and many religious traditions cultivate profound ethical stances. However, only one of the world’s religions—Christianity—places trust in Jesus Christ as the one in whom people can know who God is, who they are, what the relationship between God and people can be, and what relationships among people can be.

It is equally obvious that the clear sense in which the three great expressions of Christian faith—Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant—are united is their faith in Jesus Christ. Christian “denominations” are distinguished from one another by a broad range of theological, liturgical, and practical issues. Nevertheless, all affirm trust in Jesus Christ

as the one in whom we can know who God is, who we are, what the relationship between God and people can be, and what relationships among people can be.

These two common-sense observations suggest one of the crucial boundaries to theological diversity in the church. Any expression of faith which fails to affirm faith in Jesus Christ has crossed the boundary and is no longer Christian faith. To say this is to do more than mouth a formality, for the declaration “Jesus Christ” is a confession of faith in an identifiable reality. As we have already seen, a central affirmation of the New Testament’s witness is that the Jesus of history and the risen Christ are one: The teller of parables is the exalted Lord; the Living Christ is the one who ate and drank with sinners. This essential continuity between Jesus of Nazareth and Christ the Lord must not be broken.

The Jesus of history as we know him in the gospels is an appealing figure. Throughout history, people have been inspired by his sayings, challenged by his parables, awed by his actions, and moved by his suffering and death. Yet there is far more to Jesus than his brief time of itineration in Galilee, Samaria, and Judea. The basic documents of the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth are testimonies of faith by people who knew the power of the risen Christ. Thus the Gospels do not relate the story of Jesus as if the climax to his story were unknown. The Gospels remember the life and death of the risen Christ.

The Jesus of history, if split off from the risen Christ, is reduced to a mere moral example after the likeness of Socrates or George Washington. No matter how exemplary the life of Jesus is seen to be, it has no specifically Christian meaning apart from faith that God raised him from death and that he lives now as Lord. Expressions of devotion to “the man from Galilee,” no matter how well-intentioned, are less than Christian to the extent that they deny or ignore the testimony that “... God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow . . . and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:9-11).

The risen Christ, if split off from the Jesus of history, is reduced to a vague spiritual force after the likeness of a “life spirit” or “the power of love.” No matter how uplifting such spiritualities may be they have no specifically Christian content apart from a grounding in the Jesus of history. Expressions of inspiration by the Living Lord, no matter how intense, are less than Christian to the extent that they deny or ignore the testimony that Christ Jesus “... took the form of a servant, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death ...” (Phil. 2:7-8).

Within this boundary—the Jesus of history and the risen Christ are one—there is wide theological diversity, even within the New Testament. A

mere glance at the Gospels reveals a marked difference in perspective on the life and death of Jesus between the Synoptic Gospels on the one hand and John on the other. A slightly closer reading reveals differences among the Synoptics as well. Furthermore, Paul's perspective on the Jesus of history is different from that of the Gospels. However, all are united in grounding faith in the historical actuality of Jesus of Nazareth.

Similarly, a glance at the New Testament reveals diverse angles of vision on the risen Christ. The Gospel narratives of Christ's resurrection appearances are not identical with Paul's proclamation of Christ's resurrection reign, Hebrews' testimony to Christ as high priest, or Revelation's manifesto on the victorious judge of the world. In various strands of the New Testament, the Living Christ is viewed through lenses of resurrection, ascension, exaltation, and glorification, while the significance of the resurrection is proclaimed in terms of vindication, victory, intercession, and judgment. Yet all are united in proclaiming faith in the Living Lord.

Again, the New Testament writings look at the continuity between the Jesus of history and the risen Christ differently. The Gospels' narratives of the life, message, death, and resurrection of Jesus are not identical with Paul's exposition of the significance of Jesus Christ's cross and resurrection. Nevertheless, both Gospels and epistles present one Jesus Christ, crucified and raised from the dead. To make facile contrasts between the "simple message of Jesus" in the Gospels and the "sophisticated theology" of Paul would be to do justice to neither. All New Testament writings are united in preserving the essential unity, *Jesus Christ*.

Diversity in perspectives on the Jesus of history, the risen Christ, and the essential continuity, *Jesus Christ* is bound by the testimony of the church from the beginning: Jesus crucified is the risen Christ. Within this boundary the church has displayed marked theological diversity throughout its history. Testimonies have been given, theological proposals offered, liturgies composed, books written, ministries and missions undertaken, and prayers prayed. Some of these have been more helpful than others. Some have been found wanting. Some have been judged to be mistaken. Some continue to occasion disagreement.

Yet, whether useful or deficient, approved or judged to be mistaken, expressions within the broad boundary of faith in Jesus Christ are expressions of *Christian* faith. The church always questions, searches, disagrees, and even fights over understandings of Jesus Christ, but, as long as the basic unity is maintained, the differences are akin to a family dispute. The boundary of Christian faith is real, yet the boundary is not so tightly drawn that the richness of God's gift of new life in the Spirit given in and through Jesus Christ is impoverished by narrow restrictions of the Truth.

C. *Christian Love*

Boundaries to theological diversity are not limited to doctrinal matters. To confess faith in Jesus Christ is to enter into a community of sisters and

brothers who are bound together in relationships of love, for there is no gulf between faith and life. Thus, faith which is not expressed in love for God and neighbors is beyond the bounds of acceptable diversity.

The Christian community in Rome provides insights into love as a boundary of diversity, for it struggled with deep theological division between Jewish-Christians and Gentile-Christians. The mutual alienation of Jewish-Christian and Gentile-Christian house churches in Rome was a tragedy which is all too familiar to the contemporary church. Like the Romans, we experience separation, suspicion, and hostility which distort life in Christ and cripple the church's mission by consuming Christian energy in intramural competition.

Paul did not write to the Romans in order to effect an uneasy truce or a mechanical merger but to bring about the "obedience of faith." For Paul, the issue of Christian separation was profoundly theological, rooted in the very nature of the gospel. Similarly, the issue of Christian unity today is not one of effectiveness, efficiency, or expansion; the issue of love is theological for us just as it was for the Romans.

From the wealth of insight found in Paul's letter to the Romans it is possible to highlight two injunctions which give some shape to the boundary of love: (1) "For by the grace given to me I bid every one among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith which God has assigned you" (Rom 12:3) and (2) "Welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (Rom. 15:7).

Arrogance. Love for sisters and brothers in Christ precludes arrogant judgment of those with whom we differ. The insolence of Christians who exalt their own understanding of Christian faith while barely acknowledging the faithfulness of those with different understandings is a scandal that holds Christianity up to the contempt of the world. Denominational division is bad enough; even more damning are divisions that cut through denominations. "Conservative Christians" judge "liberal Christians" for their lack of theological integrity and the deficiency of their spirituality. "Liberal Christians" judge "conservative Christians" for their lack of theological integrity and the deficiency of their service to the poor and oppressed. Each group holds the other in contempt while imagining that its own adherents are the real Christians. Love does not parade its faith past others while looking down on them.

Haughty disdain for diverse experiences and expressions of faith is loveless; so is thoughtless disregard for the theological contributions of the church's minorities. Within the Presbyterian Church, the small number of Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans may facilitate the majority White church's lack of attention to its faithful partnership in the conversations of faith. Lovelessness reigns as the majority church ignores the theological insights of smaller communities, consigning them to the outer

fringes of theological discourse. Love does not pursue its own faith while passing by the faith of others.

Welcome. Love for brothers and sisters in Christ urges mutual welcome across the range of theological diversity. Mutual welcome is not offered on grounds of politeness or tolerance, effectiveness, or success but on the ground of Christ's welcome to us all. Christ has welcomed us; we are to welcome one another. Since it is Christ who shapes our mutuality, it is apparent that welcoming is far more than grudging acceptance. Welcoming is gracious, free, open-armed hospitality. It is equally apparent that since Christ's welcome is not dependent on our orthodoxy or our orthopraxis, neither should our welcome of brothers and sisters be dependent on theological or ethical kinship. Love opens its arms to others, "not for disputes over opinions" (Rom. 14:1), but for the pursuit of "peace and mutual upbuilding" (Rom. 14:19).

Love for persons with diverse theological convictions means actively seeking *to know and understand other experiences and expressions of faith*. Of course such seeking does not necessarily mean to agree, but it does mean striving to appreciate the faithfulness of others. To ignore or caricature the convictions of others is to cross over the boundary of acceptable diversity in the community of faith.

Love for persons with diverse theological convictions also means actively seeking *to communicate one's own experiences and expressions of faith*. Of course this does not necessarily mean to convince, but it does mean striving to articulate one's own faithfulness. To scorn genuine dialogue is to cross over the boundary of acceptable diversity in the community of faith.

Love for persons with diverse theological convictions also means actively seeking *to create an inclusive community* where all experiences and expressions of faith in the one Jesus Christ are welcomed. Of course this does not mean indifference to differences, but it does mean striving to create a community of theological discourse. To isolate theological views in a quest for purity is to cross over the boundary of acceptable diversity in the community of faith.

D. *Christian Hope*

Faith acknowledges that God is the giver of new life in the Spirit in and through Jesus Christ. We did not create the gift, neither do we guarantee the gift. The affirmation of faith is that God is the giver; Jesus Christ is Lord; and the Holy Spirit is present in the community to lead the people of God in truth. Faith that lacks confidence in God's faithful presence to maintain the church in truth and which presumptuously asserts its guardianship of right faith falls outside the bounds of acceptable diversity.

Some theological talk in the church proceeds as if God deposited truth in the world 2,000 years ago, then withdrew from people, leaving the preservation

of truth solely in human hands. Surely “the preservation of the truth” is one of the Great Ends of the Church (G-1.0200), but this cannot be construed to mean that God is no longer present in the life of the community to guide the church. Too often, lack of hope in the Spirit’s presence is evidenced by self-anointed guardians of the truth who assume that they alone stand between purity and threatening apostasy.

The promise is given to the church: “[The Father] will give you another Counselor, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth” (John 14:16, 17). “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13). Is God’s promise of the Spirit’s presence the ground of hope? Or is the promise ignored as some within the church assume that it is *their* responsibility to guide others into all the truth? The latter stance is — literally — hopeless, for it abandons trust in the Spirit’s presence, living in fear of anything new or unfamiliar, terrified that error will triumph.

Openness to the Spirit who guides the church into all the truth is difficult for those who imagine it is their responsibility to guide the church. Instead of self-assured pronouncements of theological truth we are called to attend to the Word which is proclaimed in scripture and sacraments, in the life of the community of faith and the cries of the world. Hope in the Spirit’s presence means that theological fidelity is less a matter of telling and showing than of hearing and seeing.

Admittedly, hope in the Spirit’s presence could be twisted into theological indifference which passively relies on God to take care of everything. Yet the real danger in the church tends in the opposite direction: hopeless abrogation of God’s promise in assuming the right to guide other people into all the truth.

No one who stands in the Reformed tradition will claim infallibility for the church, for history alone is sufficient to demonstrate the church’s flawed, error-filled existence. Yet the Reformed tradition’s rejection of infallibility in the church should not lead to a wholesale denial of the church as the locus of theological faithfulness. Some contemporary devaluation of the church has reached the point where many view it as the locus of theological error which must be corrected by guardians of the faith. The Reformed insight that the church is fallible has been twisted into the notion that it is unreliable.

John Calvin was not naive about the church, but he was convinced that “. . . the church is the faithful keeper of God’s truth in order that it may not perish in the world.” (IV. I:10.) Fully aware that the church was not immune from error, he confidently asserted that “. . . in it alone is kept safe and incorrupted that doctrine in which piety stands sound.” (IV. I:12.) In all of this, Calvin was not placing his trust in the faithfulness of people but of God. It is the Lord who is always present in the church to maintain the church in the truth of the gospel.

Confident hope that the Holy Spirit is present in the church to lead the church into truth frees believers from false burdens and from frenetic contention with one another. In hope, Christians can continue to engage in theological inquiry, discussion, and even argumentation. But in hope, all theological discourse will be complementary rather than exclusionary, cooperative instead of competitive, communal rather than individualistic

E. *And the Greatest of These . . .*

Every community of faith is theologically diverse; it cannot be otherwise. Theological diversity is not limitless, however. Appropriate boundaries of faith, hope, and love ensure that diverse expressions of faith will remain expressions of *Christian* faith. Yet any talk about boundaries of faith, hope, and love only makes sense when set within Christ's call for active love among sisters and brothers in faith.

The reality of theological diversity and the reality of the call to love require that Christians work to establish and maintain an open community of theological discourse. Within such a community of theological discourse there can be a common recognition that the truth about God is never reducible to a single set of formulations and that varying formulations can enrich the community. Talk about the church as a community of theological discourse is far more than a timid proposal for tolerant avoidance of conflict. It is the outgrowth of a recognition that the richness of God's grace is not confined to personal experience or defined by personal expression. It is the outgrowth of a recognition that sharing convictions in love leads to mutual enrichment and upbuilding in faithfulness. Loving one another enough to share experiences and expressions of faith openly leads to relationship rather than isolation, conversation rather than recrimination, help rather than judgment.

Both our own experience and the history of the church make it clear that theology often divides. Theological convictions are not bloodless abstractions and theological differences are not mere curiosities. What people believe about God's way in the world is vital for their own obedience and their sense of the church's obedience. Thus, theological disagreements often become sharp, going beyond intellectual inquiry to deep convictions about personal discipleship and the mission of the church. Furthermore, these diverse convictions often seem irreconcilable, with obedience hanging in the balance.

For example, varying understandings of God's grace in Jesus Christ are not simply intellectual differences; they may well lead to different ways of doing evangelism, education, worship, and service. What happens with depressing regularity, however, is that theological differences about God's grace are expressed in thoughtless parody while battles are fought over evangelistic goals, educational methodologies, liturgical practices, and strategies for service. Is it possible that genuine theological discourse about the riches of God's grace can lead to a fuller appreciation by all of the centrality of God's gracious action in Jesus Christ? Is it possible that mutual theological exploration

can lead to an appreciation of the insights of others even when differences are deep? It is possible if theological discourse is carried on within the bounds of love, for theological discourse can be both *an* expression *of* love and an enrichment of love within the communion of saints.

When love leads to *a* community of theological discourse, there is no prior restriction of theological proposals. Even views which strike some as outrageous are no longer an occasion for hasty condemnation but rather for careful theological exploration which seeks to build the church in faithfulness. Paul exhorts us to “pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding” (Rom. 14:19). Such peace is not the pretense of theological agreement or the avoidance of theological conflict. It is the open acknowledgment of differences which can be addressed in love so that the community may be built up in faith, hope, and love.

Too often, Christians relate to one another as if theological diversity provides occasions for self-righteousness and condemnation of others. In God’s grace, there is “a still more excellent way.”

VI. THEOLOGICAL UNITY AND DIVERSITY IN THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.)

Much of the discussion in this paper has taken place without specific reference to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Biblical, historical, and theological explorations have not been limited to the experience of our denomination or even the Reformed tradition. The reason is obvious. Theological unity and diversity are Christian issues before they are Presbyterian issues. Yet the occasion for this paper is the theological fragmentation of the Presbyterian Church. The time has come to examine Presbyterian realities in light of our explorations of theological unity and diversity.

There is not enough space (or wisdom) to attempt a comprehensive analysis of the denomination’s theological dynamics. Instead, the concluding section will make some general observations and pose some questions under the rubric of faith, hope, and love.

A. Faith or Ideology?

It is a commonplace to say that the Presbyterian Church is theologically diverse. Why is the reality of diversity so commonly recognized? Significantly, awareness of diversity grows out of the existence of loosely defined groupings within the church: evangelical, feminist, social activist, conservative, pietist, liberal, charismatic, etc. Although these groupings are inchoate and fluid, their existence provides the context within which “theological pluralism” is most often articulated (and decried). In spite of obligatory expressions of discomfort with labels, it is by use of labels that discussions of theological diversity usually take place. Presbyterians are less likely to survey a wide and variegated spectrum of views on, say, biblical

authority, than they are to identify several generalized theological positions on the issue. Furthermore, Presbyterians are likely to cluster positions on related issues so that theological groupings emerge.

These theological groupings are not theoretical abstractions; they are social realities. It is possible to speak realistically of charismatics, liberals, fundamentalists, liberationists, et al., in the church. However loose and changeable, these groupings are formed around common concerns, perceptions, procedures, and conclusions. They may or may not have organizational expressions, but each possesses distinct conceptual and linguistic preferences, authoritative scholars, pieties, and a host of other shared elements. When theological labels are used in the church they bear a generally recognizable content because there are generally recognizable realities to the groupings they indicate.

Theological groupings are gathered around common issues and shared answers to questions so that they hold to distinct positions on issues such as christology, biblical authority, or God's action in the world. Furthermore, these positions are brought together into integrated systems of thought and action. As a result, theological groupings tend to become focal points in which a shared system provides ready-made answers to tailor-made questions. The system elicits compliance from those who identify themselves with particular groupings. "Ideology" is the term for a system which shapes issues, poses questions, and provides answers so that the common consciousness of the group is the assumption from which the individual proceeds.

The Theological Declaration of Barmen states boldly, "We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church were permitted to abandon the form of its message and order to its own pleasure or to changes in prevailing ideological and political convictions." (8.18.) However, the relationship between the gospel and ideologies is always complex. No one views the gospel in complete freedom from ideological presuppositions which are formed by history and culture. Thus, the issue is a matter of degree. To what extent do ideological lenses focus our theological vision? To what extent do theological lenses provide a clear perception of our ideological premises? Obviously, it should be the gospel which stands in judgment over all ideologies, but such faithfulness is never achieved fully. Furthermore, the danger of unrecognized ideological bias is ever-present. The danger is heightened when groupings encourage commonly held points of view.

Like any ideology, theological ideologies consolidate groupings in two ways. First, ideology serves to bind people together in a normative set of assumptions which is confirmed by the social as well as intellectual commonalities of a grouping. Secondly, ideology binds people together in common opposition to other groupings, creating an "us-them" dynamic. Such internal and external consolidations close groupings off from the potential enrichment of differently phrased issues and differently posed questions as well as differently articulated answers. Thus there is little genuine

discourse across the border of theological groupings. For example, there may be real and important differences between evangelicals and liberationists in their understandings of the meaning of salvation, yet the issue is usually addressed through misrepresentation and censure rather than a common search for the richness of God's gift. The issue of language about God may be addressed by feminists from the perspective of experience of God and by conservatives from the perspective of the inspiration of Scripture. Each group talks past the other instead of engaging in mutual exploration of the interplay of Scripture and experience.

Faith is belief, trust, loyalty to God's gift of new life in the Spirit given in and through Jesus Christ. Such faith binds people together within a community of Christ's men and women. Ideologies are integrated systems of assertions, theories, and aims constituting programs which divide the church into competing camps. Of course, each theological grouping claims faith as the ground of its life while accusing other theological groupings of an ideological bent. Such claims only serve to confirm the ideological character of the church's theological groupings.

Are Presbyterians a church united in a faith which is expressed in diverse ways? Or are we a church whose unity is merely formal and whose diversity is congealed into a set of ideological groupings?

The woeful quality of our theological discourse points toward an unpleasant answer. If faith seeks understanding it does so within a community of faith where women and men gather around their one Lord, joining in a common exploration of the richness of grace. Sadly, such theological discourse is neglected in the Presbyterian Church. Instead, we settle for the self-confirmation within discrete theological groupings which only leads to self-righteous dismissal of those with whom we disagree.

B. *Love or Power?*

In the absence of a community of theological discourse which embraces diversity within the unity of faith in Jesus Christ, groupings tend to relate to one another on the basis of power. Instead of loving openness to brother and sister Christians (with whom one may disagree theologically) there has developed an alignment of power, both within and without the formal organization of the Presbyterian Church. Chapter IX special organizations are but one manifestation of groupings which vie for power in the church. Groupings within the denominational structure also seek exclusive power to shape and direct the church's agenda.

Love is hardly characteristic of relationships among power groupings. Instead, groupings are distanced from one another, ignoring one another when possible, and doing battle with one another when necessary. The theological concerns of relatively powerless racial ethnic minorities within the church are largely neglected. Even theological differences among more powerful

groupings are not engaged, however. Theological concerns which might be explored together are displaced by secondary issues of polity and program which are decided by procedures of power. For example, the homosexuality issue involves significant theological questions such as the nature of sin and grace, the meaning of salvation, and the nature and authority of Scripture. These questions are rarely addressed, however, and when they are dealt with, it is only from within the perspectives of separate groupings. Most often the issue is addressed by means of legal disputes about the church's polity. Simple conversation between groupings with differing views on the issue is resisted lest such dialogue be perceived as shifting the balance of power or granting legitimacy. Groupings on both sides of the issue are content to engage in polity struggles while failing to address vital theological concerns.

The Presbyterian Church is a system of governing bodies. Governing bodies do just that—govern. And since governing bodies are the primary forums for our relationships beyond the congregation, governance overwhelms the possibility for theological discourse. In the absence of forums in which theological issues can be pursued together, theological exploration tends to be limited to theological conditioning within separate groupings. Relationships among groupings are confined to jostling for position and influence, climaxing in votes taken by presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly. Amazingly, it is thought that these votes actually settle something.

The almost universal dissatisfaction with the quality of presbytery meetings may have something to do with the almost universal absence of theological concerns from those meetings. Clearly, presbyteries have business to do—business that is often dull although necessary to the church's functioning. While some of the business of presbyteries has theological content, theological discussion is often suppressed in the interest of making decisions. At meetings of the General Assembly, numerous issues with explicit theological content are brought to the floor each year. The docket is full, however, and time is limited. Thus, the "previous question" is moved quickly, the vote is taken, and the Assembly imagines that it has decided the issue. The absence of theological discourse from meetings of governing bodies might be bearable were there other forums for theological explorations by Presbyterians. There are not. We relate to one another in governing bodies and the name of the game there is "power."

Love is open-armed welcome for others whom God has welcomed in Jesus Christ. Love entails speaking the truth to one another, and listening for the truth spoken by others. On the other hand, power is concerned with victory achieved through strategic and tactical means. The distinction is not one between warm, fuzzy relationships in which truth does not matter and hard headed relationships which seek to proclaim and promote the truth. Rather, the distinction is between ways of seeking truth. Love seeks truth through genuine discourse among people of faith while power pretends that truth is a matter of numbers, influence, and votes.

Are we a church committed to love for sisters and brothers in Christ? Or are we a church in which the desire for victory leads to the pursuit of power?

Again, the answer lies in the quality of our theological discourse. If faith and love are inseparable within the Christian life, then people of faith will gather around their one Lord, joining in a common exploration of the richness of grace—an exploration in which all are welcomed, heard, and respected, as together all seek to know and serve God. Such discourse is not easy to find in the Presbyterian Church.

C. *Hope or Structures?*

In the absence of a community of theological discourse where the truth is spoken in love, power groupings tend toward structuralization. Thus, in place of hope in God's presence to guarantee the proclamation of the gospel, there develops a series of competing structures—both within and without the denominational organization—which pretend to know God's truth and seek to guarantee it.

In the Presbyterian Church, the centralization of denominational structures and the proliferation of Chapter IX and other special interest groups are but two sides of the same institutional coin. Hope is placed in the operation of structures to preserve the truth. Many of the current Chapter IX special organizations were formed out of the perceived inability of certain theological positions to gain an adequate hearing within the structures of the denomination, both at governing body and agency levels. There is little doubt that the perception was correct, that open theological discourse was lacking in an institutional structure that displayed theological and ethical certitude. Yet the response led not to new theological openness but to a calcifying of theological positions in institutional form. The emerging special organizations were *as certain* of their truth as denominational structures were of theirs. Thus the Presbyterian Church experiences a kind of theological Balkanization in which various groups are convinced that the faithfulness of the Presbyterian Church depends upon their action to preserve the gospel. Strangely, the witness of many groups within the church is a negative one, more concerned to identify the errors of other groups than to proclaim the good news of God's grace and a vision of the Christian life. Perhaps this is inevitable when theological discourse is reduced to competing claims made by competing structures.

Structures have a dynamic of their own. The original "mission" is often displaced by internal needs for growth and influence, needs which are sometimes at odds with openness, cooperation, and mutuality. Structures in the church become competitors, always wrapping separation and competition in the mantle of faithfulness to the gospel. Ironically, the conviction of faithfulness is held at the expense of hope in God's presence to preserve the faithfulness of the church.

Hope is confidence in the presence of God, trust that God ensures the proclamation of good news in the world. Structures are concerned with the competition of ideological power groupings in the belief that the good news depends upon human guarantees. People who hope in God's presence to preserve the church are able to open themselves to persons of different theological convictions, confident that discourse may lead to a fuller awareness of God's grace, not to diminution of the gospel. Structural separation and rigidity reveal a sad belief that the times are in human hands, not God's, and that the gospel's power is dependent upon our own.

Are we a church which hopes in God's presence to preserve the community of faith and its proclamation? Or are we a church which replaces hope with reliance on institutionalized structures?

The answer can be seen in the quality of our theological discourse. If faith, hope, and love are central qualities of our life together, then we can gather around our Lord, joining in mutual explorations of the richness of grace without fear that openness to others will lead to the perversion of the gospel. Hope-filled discourse of this kind is rare in the Presbyterian Church.

D. Theological Discourse

Talk about the church as a community of theological discourse may seem vague or dangerous or both. The conclusion of this paper must address these appearances and suggest that open theological discourse in the church is a realistic and creative possibility.

Vague? The notion of open theological discourse in the church may seem vague because we have gone so long without it that we cannot imagine what it might be like. For the church's ministers, theological exploration is often confined to seminary education. In the parish, ministerial attention is directed toward concerns which have a more direct bearing on personal and congregational "success": organization development and church growth, pastoral care, education, preaching, and other so-called practical matters. What little theological discourse does occur is perceived as tangential to the life of the congregation and is largely confined to the context of congenial groupings where confirmation of previously held positions is the rule.

Within congregational life, theological discourse is at a minimum. Adult education programs in churches tend to focus on Bible study, human relations issues, and social ethical issues. Obviously, these topics are not unrelated to theological concerns, yet studies proceed from theological assumptions about revelation, sin and grace, and God's way in the world, without examination of these assumptions. Little wonder, then, that there is such disappointment about biblical literacy, the quality of relationships, and congregational commitment to mission.

This is not to say that ministers and congregations are theology-less. It is to say that our theological convictions are rarely shared. Certainly, they are

rarely challenged by careful conversation with those who have different convictions. Many in the church live in theological ghettos where the quality of theological life is impoverished and the opportunity for contact with those on the outside is limited. Even when central theological issues such as the presence of the Spirit, the nature of sin, or christology are discussed, we talk past one another in our eagerness to display the correctness of our convictions and the deficiencies of other convictions.

Genuine theological discourse—open, shared explorations of faith—is neither vague nor unrealistic. However, it will not happen in the church simply by thinking it would be nice. We must recognize certain realities and incorporate those realities into the activities of the church. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) can become a community of theological discourse

—if we recognize that theological issues are among the most important issues facing the church. Theology is not an esoteric pursuit for those with time on their hands and a theoretical bent. What we believe about the meaning of salvation, for instance, has enormous implications for the life of the church and its mission in the world. If the church does not talk about its diverse understandings of salvation, it should not be surprised to find that its life is fragmented and its mission is a source of contention.

—if we recognize that theological views of individuals and groupings are never flawless and that we stand to become more faithful as we engage in theological exploration with others, especially those with whom we disagree. The fact that experiences and expressions of faith are diverse in the church need not lead to anger or despair over the wrongheadedness of others; it can become an opportunity for enrichment in the common quest for truth.

—if we recognize that the majority white church has much to learn from racial-ethnic minority constituencies within the community of faith. The theological insights of racial ethnic groups are not curiosities to be ignored or tolerated or patronized. Rather, the experiences and expressions of faith which are at the heart of diverse cultural groups in the church can free the whole church from theological provincialism.

The church as a community of theological discourse will not grow out of awareness and good intentions alone. While it is not within the province of this paper to set forth a program for the church, it is clear that three major elements within the Presbyterian Church have a prominent role to play in the promotion of theological discourse within the whole community of faith.

The Theology and Worship Ministry Unit, a new reality in the life of the Presbyterian Church, has an opportunity to play a major role in the development of genuine theological discourse across the denomination. Surely it will not be sufficient for the Theology and Worship Unit to produce occasional papers for momentary General Assembly consumption. Rather, the unit must give attention to various ways in which theological

discourse which cuts across diverse groupings in the church can become a staple of denominational life.

Presbyteries are the forums where ministers and elders of diverse theological convictions come together regularly. The life of presbyteries need not be confined to the doing of business or even to the doing of mission. Presbyteries can also provide abundant opportunities for theological discourse which draws the church together in hopeful, loving explorations of faith.

Seminaries can address the depressing fragmentation of the curriculum in which theology is too often seen as “impractical” study which can be abandoned once a degree is earned or relegated to the position of an occasional ministerial pastime. Seminary education can face squarely the reality of theological diversity by providing models and building habits of theological discourse which enrich the life of the church.

Dangerous? Even those who recognize the possibilities for theological discourse in the church may think that such discourse is dangerous. After all, will not the airing of theological diversity in the church only serve to increase conflict in an already conflict-laden denomination? The answer is “yes.” Bringing differences into open dialogue will sharpen those differences. There should be no naive expectation that if we will only talk about our experiences and expressions of faith with one another we will discover that we all agree. Whenever the church has engaged in genuine theological discourse, conflict has resulted.

Yet we are not dealing with the alternatives of tranquility or conflict, as if we are at peace when we avoid theological differences and divided when we talk about them. The question has to do with the nature of our conflict. In the present situation, our very real theological diversity leads to conflict on several fronts. First, there is conflict over theological diversity itself, celebrated by some and deplored by others. This conflict is characterized by separation and accusation. Second, there is conflict over the church’s mission. This conflict is theological at root but is rarely addressed in common theological exploration and is rarely resolved. Third, there is conflict over commitment to the common life of the denomination, of which “creeping congregationalism” is but a symptom.

We need not glorify conflict in order to recognize that conflict is not an evil to be avoided at all costs. At a minimum, it is preferable to fight about the basic issues that divide us rather than mask or displace those differences. More importantly, it is preferable to deal openly with our theological diversity. If conflict occurs within the context of the recognition of mutual faith, the practice of mutual love, and the living of mutual hope, conflict will be transformed from guerrilla warfare to hard but cooperative struggle for faithfulness. There may be times when we will be surprised by unexpected commonalities. There may be more times when we will realize that differences remain sharp even as

they are subsumed within commitment to the integrity of brothers and sisters in Christ.

Another perceived danger of renewed attention to theological discourse is that such activity will turn the church inward, detracting from its mission in the world. Nothing could reveal the disastrous state of theology in the church more clearly than this fear! It lays bare the belief that theology is a luxury which is irrelevant to the real life of the church. Surely our reading of the Bible shows that there is no distinction between faith and life, theology and ethics, discourse and mission. The church's mission is most faithful and vital when it grows out of carefully articulated theological conviction. Theological discourse will not detract from the church's mission; it will rescue mission from the prison of technique and restore it to the freedom of the gospel.

The church has neglected theological discourse for too long. As a result, our unity is merely formal and our diversity is divisive. Unity and diversity are complementary realities in the life of the church when sisters and brothers lovingly explore faith in the God who gives new life in the Spirit in and through Jesus Christ.

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!

How unsearchable are God's judgments

and how inscrutable God's ways!

"For who has known the mind of the Lord,

or who has been the Lord's counselor?"

"Or who has given a gift to God

that would require repayment?"

For from God and through God and to God are all things,

to whom be the glory for ever. Amen.

—Romans 11:33–36

For Further Reading

- Bloesch, Donald G. *The Future of Evangelical Christianity: A Call for Unity Amid Diversity*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1983.
- Boff, Leonardo. *Church: Charism and Power*. New York: Crossroad, 1985.
- Brown, Raymond. *The Church the Apostles Left Behind*. New York: Paulist, 1984.
- Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1559 ed. (esp. Book IV, chapters I & II) Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960.
- Cone, James. *Speaking the Truth: Ecumenism, Liberation, and Black Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986.
- Curran, Charles E. *Faithful Dissent*. Kansas City: Shed & Ward, 1986.
- Douglass, Jane Dempsey. *Women, Freedom, and Calvin*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985.
- Dunn, James D. G. *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977.
- Fiorenza, Elizabeth Shussler. *In memory of Her. A Feminist Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. New York: Crossroad, 1985.
- Goldingay, John. *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987.
- Guthrie, Shirley C. *Diversity in Faith — Unity in Christ*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986.
- Jewett, Robert. *Christian Tolerance*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982.
- Leith, John H. *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition*. Atlanta: John Knox, 1977.
- Loetscher, Lefferts A. *The Broadening Church*. Philadelphia: 1957.
- Man, Martha L. (ed.) *Walking in Harmony: Earth, Sky, Water, People*. Albuquerque: New Mexico Council of Churches, n.d.
- Pelikan, Jaroslav. *Jesus Through the Centuries*. New Haven: Yale, 1985.
- Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Theologies Written from Feminist Perspectives: An Introductory Study” 199th General Assembly (1987), *Minutes* (Part I, Journal), pp. 637–661.
- Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) “Confessional Nature of the Church” 198th General Assembly (1986), *Minutes* (Part I, Journal), pp. 51–527.
- Program Agency, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) “Authenticity Before the Altar: A Racial/Ethnic Colloquim.” *Church and Society* LXXVI:4. March/April, 1986.
- Segundo, Juan Luis. *The Community Called Church*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1973.
- Song, C.S. *Third Eye Theology*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979.
- Wilmore, Gayraud. *Black and Presbyterian*. Philadelphia: Geneva, 1983.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

The Advisory Council on Discipleship and Worship and the Council on Theology and Culture recommend that the 200th General Assembly (1988) receive the report "Is Christ Divided?", commend the report to the church for information and study, and adopt the following recommendations:

1. That the report be printed and made available for sale in the church. The cost of printing 3000 copies of the report, amounting to approximately \$2,000, can be borne by funds in the budget of the Theology and Worship Unit set aside for this purpose.

2. That the report be translated into Korean and Spanish and made available for sale to the appropriate congregations.

3. That the Stated Clerk be requested to mail a copy of the report to each presbytery executive and each synod executive and stated clerk.

4. That the report be referred to the General Assembly Council as a resource to the Council in the fulfillment of its responsibility to "cultivate and promote the spiritual welfare of the whole church," encouraging the General Assembly Council to set aside time at three or more successive meetings to consider the implications of the report for churchwide "planning, coordination, consultation and review." (G-13.0201)

5. That the report be referred to the Theology and Worship Ministry Unit as a resource to the Unit in the fulfillment of its assigned responsibilities, directing the Unit to design a process for dealing with the report and its implications for the life of the church. The process might include such elements as:

a. Consulting with the Education and Congregational Nurture Unit to explore creative ways in which the boundaries of faith, hope, and love can be utilized in a variety of settings (including worship) to increase the unity of the community of faith, appreciate the enrichment a diversity of understanding can provide, and broaden understanding of theological concepts and experience.

b. Consulting with the Racial Ethnic Ministry Unit to explore ways in which the report can be an element in encouraging churchwide awareness of theological insights arising from racial ethnic constituencies and in promoting churchwide discourse concerning those insights.

c. Consulting with five to fifteen presbyteries to consider the report and develop means by which presbyteries can foster theological discourse. Models arising from these consultations can then be made available to all presbyteries.

d. Consulting with all special organizations (Chapter IX organizations), inviting them to prepare reflective responses to the report. The responses can help to shape the ongoing dialogue between the unit and the special organizations and to shape discourse among the special organizations.

6. That the Theology and Worship Ministry Unit report annually for five years to the General Assembly regarding its process for dealing with the report and the results of programs developed within the process.

7. That the report be referred to the Committee on Theological Education with the recommendation that it be sent to presidents, deans, library directors, and all theology, history, Bible, and polity faculties of the theological institutions of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) as well as all Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) faculty teaching in other theological institutions, as a resource for use in curriculum development, course offerings, and extracurricular discussion groups. The report should also be sent to student body presidents in Presbyterian theological institutions.