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Dear Presbyterian Leader:

I am pleased to send you the fifth volume in the Price H. Gwynn III Church Leadership Series. This Geneva Press publication is intended to honor an extraordinary individual who has provided distinguished leadership to the Presbyterian

Publishing Corporation (PPC) and to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) at all levels.

This insightful essay, *Who's In? Who's Out?* by church theologian Joseph Small, is particularly relevant given the debates currently being conducted in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Indeed, this trenchant theological reflection may well come at a *kairotic* moment (in the words of Paul Tillich), as the church seeks to understand what characteristics define this ecclesial community and what constitutes faithfulness in the midst of Presbyterian pluralism.

By retrieving and juxtaposing the original motivation of the first-century Pharisees with the gospel message of Jesus, Small offers those on various sides of the present debates—not to mention those in the middle—fresh insights about what it means to maintain theological convictions with conviction, hear the good news of Jesus anew, and bring God properly into the (committed) conversation. The views expressed in this essay are of course those of the author alone, but I commend them to you as a heuristic device for moving much of the theological discourse transpiring in the PC(USA) today to a higher plane.

As anyone who has come in contact with Price Gwynn knows well, he is a person who holds definite theological opinions and does not shrink from sharing and debating them. And yet I know for a fact that Price Gwynn is interested above all in discerning what faithfulness requires and how God may best be honored in everything. To this end, I am confident *Who's In? Who's Out?* reflects well on Gwynn's legacy of Christian leadership. I hope and pray it will also play a decisive role in framing the important discussions being held all across the Presbyterian Church at present. I cannot imagine a more important message for Presbyterian Church leaders right now than this one from Joe Small.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Davis Perkins". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Davis Perkins
President & Publisher



Price H. Gwynn III, Moderator of the 202nd General Assembly (1990) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), is the son and grandson of Presbyterian ministers, and became a successful businessman as well as an extremely effective elder of the Presbyterian Church. Prior to his election as moderator, this North Carolina native

was vice-president and director of Lance, Inc., having previously served as president of two other major companies. After being elected, Gwynn became the only moderator of our denomination to be featured in *The Saturday Evening Post* for his extensive business experience. Such experience prepared him to serve as chairman of the board of Presbyterian Publishing Corporation during an important time of transition. Gwynn served on the board from 1993 to 2001.

His experience and leadership at all levels of the Presbyterian Church are equally impressive. Gwynn has served as deacon, elder, Sunday school teacher, and synod representative and has held extensive presbytery committee assignments, as well as acting as moderator of his presbytery. He was awarded five honorary degrees from Presbyterian colleges, including Davidson, where he also served on the board of trustees. During his distinguished career, he chaired the board of Presbyterian Hospital in Charlotte, and he is an active member of the board of trustees of Union Theological Seminary in Richmond.

Further national church leadership roles include former membership on the General Assembly Council, the Committee on the Spiritual Welfare of the Church, and the Special Committee for Review of the General Assembly. Gwynn has combined all of these activities with a distinguished military career, outstanding civic service, and, with his wife, Katherine, strong family ties with their three sons and their grandchildren.

Who's In? Who's Out?

Pharisees, Presbyterians,
and the Discernment
of Faithfulness

Joseph D. Small



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Who's In? Who's Out?

In a church where “pluralism” has become an essential tenet, with “celebrating diversity” as its liturgical complement, it is not surprising that questions begin to be raised about boundaries. Are there limits to diversity? Is any variation on Christian faith legitimate—even valuable? For that matter, are there any borders that let us say what Christian faith is and is not? And even if there are, does Christian faith contain essential truth that is absent from other world religions?

Boundaries do exist among us, of course, although they tend to appear as lines drawn in the sand—challenges that threaten others with expulsion from the camp. Even these lines are evidence of our diversity, however, for so many of us draw so many different lines that no terrain is established ground.

Thus we find ourselves in an odd situation: on the one hand, diversity is *de rigueur* while, on the other, we busy ourselves staking out boundaries—linguistic, doctrinal, ethical, behavioral, cultural, and on and on. Since we are unable to agree on commonly acknowledged boundaries, our strategy seems to be to celebrate diversity while attempting to embed our own notions of limits within ecclesial norms and ecclesiastical regulations. Groups within the church occupy themselves with defining essential tenets, promulgating inclusive language guidelines, legislating sexual behavior, demarcating ethical faithfulness, enforcing inclusive representation, and more.

Our difficulty is that, too often, rhetoric muffles reason and logic stifles grace. Few among us are cheerleaders for every instance of diversity, and few are rigid enforcers of all narrow orthodoxies. Even as we recognize the creative force of diversity, we understand that any community must share certain meanings, values, and practices if it is to be a community at all.

The complexity of the matter can be seen in no less a saint than John Calvin. How do we know which communities of faith are fully Christian and which are not? “Wherever we see the Word of God rightly preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists.”¹ Although Calvin stakes out boundaries, they seem to encompass a large playing field. First, Calvin notes that the two marks are so critical that any church that exhibits them is to be embraced “even if it otherwise swarms with many faults.” So within the

limits of right doctrine and worship, there is room for diversity. But what if some fault creeps into either doctrine or worship? “This ought not to estrange us from communion with the church. For not all the articles of true doctrine are of the same sort. Some are so necessary to know that they should be certain and unquestioned by all men as the proper principles of religion.” Fair enough: only the central doctrines are essential boundaries while diversity in “peripheral” doctrines is tolerable. What are these necessary doctrines? The best Calvin can do is, “God is one; Christ is God and the Son of God; our salvation rests in God’s mercy; and the like.”²

Calvin, our forebear in the tradition and no slouch when it comes to theological precision, illustrates the complexity of our problem. Yes, there is room for diversity and yes, there are limits to diversity. But even if we were to take Calvin’s list of necessary doctrines as the proper limits to diversity, we would be left with three generalities followed by an impatient *et cetera*. How, then, can we wend our way among the shoals of promiscuous diversity and intolerant uniformity?

The question is not simply a matter for polite discussion. Words like “limits,” “boundaries,” and “borders” are soft terms for what have become fortified walls. Do the walls keep the barbarians at bay, or do they exclude rightful inhabitants? Even within the walled city there are gates and doors. Do they bar citizens from public property, or do they protect against vandalism? Within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), “definitive guidance” and “authoritative interpretation,” Amendments B and A and O and A again, moves to tighten ordination vows or to make ordination a local and regional matter, the controversy over the Re-Imagining conferences, “holy unions,” COCU, inclusive language, interfaith relations and Christian integrity, nongeographic presbyteries, human sexuality debates, and more are all instances of the unity/diversity issue. Moreover, all are instances in which persons feel themselves aggrieved.

It is not possible to resolve tension within the unity/diversity dynamic by providing a neat formula. Even if one were offered, it would be rejected by most even as it was embraced by some. What is needed in the church is sustained consideration of the issues, going beyond the exchange of slogans. A variety of approaches is called for in the expectation that they may be complementary, yielding new wisdom on a vexing problem. The following exploration of some New Testament material may provide one way to frame the issue.

Beginning with Pharisees

The Pharisees are a good place to start the inquiry, not because they are examples of self-righteous intolerance but because they were among those in first-century Palestine who struggled with the issue at hand. Jacob Neusner,³ E. P. Sanders,⁴ and others have demonstrated that traditional Christian stereotypes of the Pharisees do not fit the evidence, even if the evidence is restricted to the Gospels. Far from being self-assured legalists who imagined they could earn salvation by the merit of their good works, Pharisees were devout “laymen” who strove to sanctify all of life through obedience to the Torah and its interpretations. They were not “Sabbath Jews” but men who wanted faith to be constitutive of all reality.

Although evidence for the shape of pre-A.D. 70 Pharisaism is scanty, it appears that the Pharisees began as a political party during the Maccabean period. As Jewish independence gave way to foreign domination, the Pharisees were faced with the choice of retaining their political character and risking annihilation or abandoning politics and surviving in a very different form. Neusner concludes that the Pharisees determined to concentrate on what they believed was really important in politics: “fulfillment of all the laws of the Torah, even ritual purity and tithing, to achieve elevation of the life of all the people, at home and in the streets, to what Torah had commanded: *You shall be a kingdom of priests and a holy people.*”⁵

Among other things, this meant that Pharisees attempted to live as if they were always in the Temple sanctuary of Jerusalem. Not content to restrict faithfulness to worship, they sought to expand religious observance to all areas of life. Therefore, even complicated and inconvenient purity laws were extended to social life. In the midst of a hostile Roman culture, Pharisees were a community of “resident aliens.” With apologies to Hauerwas and Willimon, Pharisees could have proclaimed, “We argue that the political task of [Jews] is to be the [Temple] rather than to transform the world.”⁶ The Pharisees attempted to cope with an uncertain situation: how can people be faithful to God in all of life when that life is lived within an alien, even hostile environment? How can faithful people avoid capitulation to the values of the dominant culture?

The Pharisees answered the questions by striving to live out shared practices based on the shared values of the Torah and its traditions. It may be important to remember that being a

Pharisee did not mean having an “occupation,” much less being part of a separated community. Pharisees were people from many walks of life who were bound by a common determination to extend ritual purity to the whole of life. In this way, they could be faithful to God in the midst of a culture that was inhospitable to faithfulness and in which accommodation was an ever-present danger.

The Pharisees maintained that it was necessary to be a member of the covenant people in order to be a beneficiary of God’s righteousness. Inclusion within the covenant necessitated comprehensive observance of the law, particularly those regulations that marked out the Jews in their distinctiveness as the people of the one God. Among these, food and sabbath laws were particularly prominent, both in Jewish self-understanding and in Roman perception of the Jews as a people. The Pharisees, as that group especially concerned with maintaining Jewish identity and faithfulness, called for observance of the law that went beyond the merely “religious.” What was required within the Temple should be observed in all of life.

We misunderstand the Pharisees (and the difference between them and Jesus) if we perpetuate the stereotype of legalists striving for salvation by the merit of good works. Rather, as devout Jews the Pharisees rested on God’s choice of a people and understood salvation in terms of the covenant given to Israel. Thus, the Pharisees’ passionate concern was “to preserve, maintain, and defend Israel’s status as the people of the covenant and the righteousness of the law. . . .”⁷

Threats to Community?

The character of Pharisaic convictions and the nature of the difference between the Pharisees and Jesus can be sensed by glancing at the cohesive narratives in Mark 2:1–3:6. All five units within 2:1–3:6 focus on controversies between Jesus and his critics, particularly the Pharisees. Jesus claimed authority in matters of healing and forgiveness (2:1–12), associating with sinners (2:13–17), fasting (2:18–22), the Sabbath (2:23–28), and healing and the Sabbath (3:1–6). The two healing stories bracket the following three controversies with Pharisees concerning customary Jewish practice.

Mark 2:15–17: The issue is the Pharisees’ conviction that Jesus disregards the law, specifically the laws governing table fellowship: clean and unclean foods, tithes, and ritual purity. These laws in particular preserved Israel’s holiness as the peo-

ple of God, which is why those who disregarded them drew the epithet “sinners” from the Pharisees. Jesus, in eating with such sinners, also shows disregard for the law, which implies disregard for Israel’s identity. Thus the genuine question, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

Mark 2:18–20: Once again Jesus ignores an observance—fasting—that was central to the Pharisees’ program of covenant righteousness. The insufficient commitment of Jesus and his community of disciples (contrasted with the commitment of John’s disciples and of the Pharisees) draws a puzzled question *from the people* who wonder why Jesus cares so little about the identifying marks of God’s community.

Mark 2:23–28: For the Pharisees, the Sabbath law was a fundamental element of Israel’s covenant relationship with God, marking Israel out as the particular people of the one God. For Jesus and the disciples to disregard so fundamental an obligation is tantamount to denying Israel’s election and abrogating the covenant. The question is valid: “Why are they doing what is not lawful?”

These incidents, preserved in a cohesive unit, are not evidence of pharisaic conviction that their good works merit God’s favor. Rather, they illustrate the self-understanding of devout Jews, and particularly of the Pharisees: identity as a member of God’s specially chosen people is expressed and embodied in obedience to the law. Why, then, does Jesus share the table with those who have placed themselves outside the community? Why does Jesus ignore constitutive community practices? Why does Jesus condone action that breaks down the cohesiveness of God’s people? These are not petty, prejudicial interrogations but rather understandably puzzled and hostile responses to behavior that threatens community.

Corporate Disciplines

If we are able to overcome Christian bias against the Pharisees and against the law, we may be able to understand the credible way the Pharisees faced a serious situation. While we are not comfortable with “laws” to govern our lives, we understand the importance of shared meaning and of certain disciplines to establish, maintain, and expand our identity as Christians in an increasingly secularized and pluralistic society. Like the Pharisees, we know that corporate disciplines are essential to being God’s people, although we use terms such as “socialization” and “spiritual formation” instead of “law” to express the

reality that “to become a disciple is . . . to become a part of a different community with a different set of practices.”⁸

If the Pharisees’ desire to establish and maintain Jewish identity in an environment that threatened faith and faithfulness is understandable to us, why was Jesus in disagreement and conflict with them? James D. G. Dunn notes that “the issue as it came to be at the time of Jesus . . . was not merely about points of law, or of ethical decision, but about how Jews should live as being the people of God, about what walking (*halakah*) according to God’s statutes actually involved.”⁹ The issue was not whether distinctive identity is appropriate for a community of faith but that the Pharisees identified community distinctiveness with God’s favor. What Sanders and others term “covenantal nomism” expresses the pharisaic conviction that keeping the law affirmed and maintained standing within the covenant people of God.

For the Pharisees, “law-keeping was what covenant members needed to do in order to affirm and maintain their status within the covenant people of God.”¹⁰ The issue, then, was not the law as such but the law seen as mark and confirmation of Israel’s election, the law understood as attesting membership in the people of God. Thus, works of the law limited the grace of God “*not* because they constituted impossible merit-earning demands, but because they were so firmly identified as distinctive marks of the Jewish nation and so in effect confined the grace of God to members of that nation.”¹¹ The Pharisees further confined the grace of God by declaring their version of law keeping to be the only valid expression of covenantal status.

The issue of proper law keeping was not a polite discussion about which “lifestyle” to choose but rather the focus of aggressive factional dispute in which each side condemned those who disagreed with its *halakah*, excluding them from the covenant. The epithet “sinners” was hurled at those who disagreed with the Pharisees’ understanding of what it meant to walk according to the law of God. Dunn and others have demonstrated that at the time of Jesus “sinners” was an explicitly *factional* term, “denoting those outside the boundary as defined by the group who used it, where ‘wickedness,’ by definition, was conduct *outside the boundary*, conduct deemed unacceptable *to God* by those who counted themselves as inside.”¹²

Jesus’ difference with the Pharisees was far more than a demonstration that human need justifies an occasional breach of otherwise valid law. In a radical departure from “covenantal nomism,” Jesus proclaimed liberty in the new age of God’s

favor: covenant and peoplehood, piety and faithfulness, were no longer to be defined by the law and its interpretations but through the good news of the nearness of God's reign. The dispute between Jesus and the Pharisees concerned the character of God's covenant and the question of who determines the shape of covenant faithfulness.

It should not be inferred that Jesus was indifferent to covenant, to community, to the distinctiveness of God's way in the world, to the necessity of disciplined life, even to boundaries. The questions are, What constitutes covenant? Who is within the community? What is the trajectory of God's Way? How is the disciplined life lived? Where are the boundaries?

There are no transparent answers to these questions; the Pharisees themselves are evidence that definitive answers can become problematic. The three narratives in Mark suggest that the answers have something to do with openness to those on the outside ("I have come to call not the righteous but sinners"), with new possibilities of joy on the inside ("As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast"), and with God's covenant as service to people ("The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath"). Jesus is not about circling the wagons, grinding duty, and religion for its own sake.

Yet there is more to it than a negation of the Pharisees. "For I tell you," says Jesus, "unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:20). The Pharisees may have come up with the wrong answer, but they asked the right questions: What is the character of the community of God's people? How can God's people live faithfully in the midst of a culture that may overwhelm them? What does it take for God's people to remain *God's people*? Jesus was not indifferent to these questions. He, too, seemed to know that only a community of shared meaning can be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

Inhospitable Culture

The Pharisees did not seek to withdraw from ordinary society but rather to live differently (purely) *within the culture*. This distinguished them from fellow Jews who did not choose such a course, however. The Pharisees' values and practices hardened into "us and them" boundaries *within Judaism* that led to denigration of those on the outside, hostility toward those who proclaimed a different way of faithfulness. Nevertheless,

their questions, in some shape, are our questions too. And if their answers are inadequate, we are still left with the task of providing answers that lead toward our own faithfulness.

Issues of pluralism, of unity and diversity, are not confined to times when the church finds itself in an uncongenial culture, yet they take on a distinctive cast in such times. If the church does not find its identity within a supportive culture, it must discover its identity in some measure of distinction from the culture.

It is a sad irony that in a time when Christian identity is threatened by an increasingly inhospitable and even hostile culture, the Christian community is consumed by internecine warfare. Yet underlying evident party spirit may be the unarticulated conviction that it is precisely the cultural challenge that makes it so critical to determine how faithfulness to the gospel requires us to believe and live. However, either this determination is not made, or it is confined to mutually antagonistic pockets of conviction within the church. Strident irrecconcilability, not shared judgment, seems to mark the church's "common" life.

What Alasdair MacIntyre says of Western society generally is also true of the church within that society: "The most striking feature of contemporary moral utterance is that so much of it is used to express disagreements; and the most striking feature of the debates in which those disagreements are expressed is their interminable character. I do not mean by this just that such debates go on and on and on—although they do—but also that they apparently can find no terminus. There seems to be no rational way of securing moral agreement. . . ." ¹³ There seems, in the church, to be no way of finding moral or theological or ecclesial agreement. Moreover, disagreement and debate is increasingly carried on through an exchange of slogans that communicate nothing to opponents and little to allies.

Jesus and the Pharisees

At the risk of asking three little narratives in Mark's Gospel to bear too great a burden, it may be possible to find in Jesus' responses to the Pharisees some clues that can help us move toward shared meaning and common conviction.

"*The sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the sabbath*" (Mark 2:27). Jesus' frequent transgression of Sabbath regulations is a distinctive feature in the Gospels. While the reasons for Sabbath breaking are varied, there is nothing to suggest that Jesus was indifferent to the Sabbath or

that he wished the Sabbath to disappear. The Sabbath is God's good gift to faithful people: the Sabbath was made for humankind. Precisely as God's good gift, however, the Sabbath must not produce harm or inhibit wholeness. Jesus treated objections to his Sabbath behavior seriously, responding with a distinctive appreciation of the way in which the Sabbath could be observed. The Sabbath was God's good gift, but the Sabbath did not exist for its own sake.

Neither right doctrine, nor right worship, nor right morality exists for its own sake. Belief, praise, and faithfulness are all apprehensions of *God's Way* in the world, a Way that leads to abundant life for all of creation. Thus, development of a particular orthodoxy or orthopraxis cannot harden into an object of loyalty, as if faithfulness to God were synonymous with adherence to a particular doctrine or practice. This is not to say that thinking and living the faith are matters of indifference, any more than Jesus was indifferent to the Sabbath. It is to say, however, that neither theological formulations nor ethical practices can be objects of loyalty, for God alone is the One to whom loyalty is due.

The Christian community is not a casual assemblage of miscellaneous beliefs and practices; faith and faithfulness are not idiosyncratic. However, our call to shared faith and common practice cannot result in rigid formulations that divide the community into saints and sinners. Whenever a part of the Christian community uses its own understanding of the gospel as a means of identifying enemies, the news becomes less than good.

“*The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they?*” (Mark 2:19). The immanence of God's Way in the world is the occasion for joy. The issue is not whether God's people will live in a distinctive way but rather what constitutes the character of that distinctiveness: the delight of the wedding banquet or the grim determination of fasting. Furthermore, the distinctiveness of God's people is now seen in expansive joy rather than in exclusory disciplines. God's new Way in the world draws a community of open celebration, not a cadre of discriminating discipline.

Faith and faithfulness are not occasions for judgment, anger, and bitterness, are they? It is remarkable that theological and ethical convictions so often turn to contempt for those whose judgments are different. Rather than sources of joy, belief and morality seem to produce bitter enmity toward those with different convictions and practices. Within the church, civility (not to mention charity) is in short supply, for

apprehensions of the truth are taken as markers to identify enemies rather than as gifts to be shared.

The Christian community cannot be indifferent to fragmented beliefs and practices as if they are merely acceptable expressions of personal preference or group perspective. Yet if the prevailing attitude toward those whose convictions are different is one of hostile condemnation, joy in the presence of Christ is exchanged for smug attempts to dominate or dismiss others.

“*I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners*” (Mark 2:17). “Righteous” and “sinners” were factional terms, distinguishing those who lived out the Pharisees’ program of covenant righteousness from those whose way of life was outside the bounds of pharisaic piety. Jesus called those outside the camp, but it was a *call*. Jesus did not condemn “sinners,” but neither did he endorse their way of life. He called them to a different way—*God’s Way* in the world—a Way that required repentance and trust in a new and good reality.

When Jesus ate dinner at Levi’s house with a company of tax collectors and sinners, it is unlikely that he engaged in casual conversation about revenue collection techniques or joked about people who took religion too seriously. Jesus *called* people to radical change in belief and practice; whoever responded to Jesus’ proclamation of the will of God was his “brother and sister and mother.” On the one hand, Jesus went to those outside the camp, but, on the other hand, Jesus invited them into a new camp.

The church’s current evangelism emphasis encourages attitudes and approaches toward those outside the faith that we seem unwilling to offer to others within the Christian community! Our gracious calls to unbelievers are strangely different from our condemnations of sisters and brothers with whom we disagree. Where Jesus called and offered, we accuse and spurn. Where Jesus proclaimed good news, we hurl threats.

Is it possible to retain firm conviction *and* maintain relationships of openness toward those whose convictions are different? It is not only possible; it is integral to our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ. Jesus did not confine himself to the company of the like-minded, where all nodded their heads in agreement with one another while issuing condemnations against others. Jesus ate and drank with tax collectors, sinners, (*and Pharisees!*), refusing to identify “outsiders” from whom he would separate himself. At the same time, Jesus did not celebrate the diversity of convictions uttered by collaborators, persons of indifferent faithfulness, and the rigidly self-righteous.

Unity, Diversity, Tension

The issue of unity and diversity within the Christian community has always been part of Christian faith and life. James Dunn goes so far as to say that “diversity is not some secondary feature of Christianity, not just a sequence of temporal husks that can be peeled away to leave a virgin, pure, unchanging core. *Diversity is fundamental to Christianity*. As fundamental as the unity and the tension.”¹⁴

Unity . . . diversity . . . tension: these fundamental realities of Christian faith and life mean that the church always struggles within itself over the shape of faithfulness. These struggles are particularly difficult, and may be particularly important, in times when the Christian community finds itself in the midst of an inhospitable culture.

A brief look at the Pharisees and Jesus’ response to them is not intended to be one more instance of setting up a pharisaic straw man to be torn down by “Christian” truth. The Pharisees’ attempt to live out distinctive patterns of faithfulness was neither foolish nor sinister. They rightly perceived that God’s covenant calls for a way of faith and life different from “the way things are” and that amalgamation into the values and practices of the culture is a constant, clear and present danger. Neither Jesus nor the early Christian community rejected the Pharisees’ judgment that the situation confronting God’s people required distinctive faithfulness; Jesus and the early Christian community proclaimed a new possibility, however.

Who’s In? Who’s Out?

Who’s in and who’s out? The beginning (but only the beginning) of an answer is found in the refusal to exclude blocks of people on the basis of their differing convictions and practices. Within the church, one group’s beliefs and disciplines cannot become boundaries that exclude other groups with different beliefs and disciplines, consigning them to outsider status. This does not imply a *laissez faire* attitude toward theology and ethics, as if what people believe and do is a matter of personal preference or factional option. It does mean, however, that the theological and ethical convictions of one group within the Christian community are not the boundaries of Christian community. The actual or effective exclusion of identifiably different communities of conviction within the

church—whether called liberals, evangelicals, charismatics, liberationists, conservatives, activists, gays and lesbians, feminists, patriarchalists, pietists, gentiles, or sinners—is inimical to God’s Way in the world.

Beliefs and practices are our apprehensions of God’s Way among us. They are *our* apprehensions of God’s Way among us, so we cannot live as if they did not matter. Nevertheless, they are our apprehensions of *God’s* Way among us, so we cannot live as if our apprehensions are ultimate. How, then, do communities of conviction within the church relate to other communities of different conviction within the church? If disassociation is ruled out, each group is called to life together. If castigation is ruled out, each group is called to speaking and listening in a manner that recognizes the integrity of the other. If indifference is ruled out, each group is called to bear faithful witness to its own apprehension of the truth.

None of this is a recipe for easygoing tolerance, settling for a pluralism of thought and action that, ironically, can harden diversity into an ideology. Communities of conviction are, after all, communities of *conviction*, and they should not be expected to act as if their apprehensions of the truth were merely elective sentiments. Yet harsh indictment is nothing more than the other side of the easy-tolerance coin, for neither approach bears joyful, confident witness to an apprehension of the truth that can convince others. Both are oddly despairing about the possibility that a community of conviction can draw others to recognize the faithfulness of its beliefs and practices.

Committed Conversation

Diverse communities of conviction can commit themselves to difficult conversation that will include careful analysis and pointed debate in a common search for faithfulness. Each community can assert its own convictions forcefully, but neither community should resort to anathemas or silences, to exclusion or withdrawal. The debates should not be cut off by forcing polity “victories” or by retreating into organizational enclaves.

Committed conversation among diverse communities of conviction within the church is not a matter of valuing dialogue for its own sake or a means of avoiding unpleasant conflict. Committed conversation, including the sharp debate it entails, is one means of discerning faithfulness. Discernment of faithfulness can occur in two ways. First, commitment to conversation with differing groups of Christians necessitates

careful thinking and talking about the faith *within* each community of conviction. In order to engage in serious conversation, it is necessary to examine one's own convictions, arriving at a more careful articulation of customary positions. Second, commitment to conversation can lead to talking and thinking about the faith with people of differing positions in ways that may alter or confirm or enrich initial convictions. In both cases, the goal is faithfulness.

Openness to committed conversation is not an ideological commitment to dialogue, as if the mere act of speaking and listening were an end in itself. *Committed* conversation implies that any conversation worth having will express the convictions of all participants. Openness to committed conversation is not an optimistic expectation that if only people will talk with one another, tensions will lessen and agreement will draw near. *Committed* conversation implies that discernments may clash and that the point may be reached where agreement is no longer a present possibility.

Yet committed *conversation* rules out two courses of action within the community of faith. The first, all too common in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), is a premature rush to ecclesiastical legislation. It sometimes seems that polity is the first refuge of a Presbyterian. Substantive issues of deep and differing conviction cannot be avoided by pretending that a paragraph in the *Book of Order* will resolve the matter, much less "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3). At its best, polity is an expression of the church's faithful life together; at its worst, polity becomes a club to force compliance or withdrawal. Ecclesiastical legislation can be the conclusion of a process of discernment within the church, not a preemptive strike against a perceived enemy.

Committed *conversation* also rules out premature withdrawal into separated enclaves, whether de facto or de jure. One group's understanding of Christian faith and life may be so firmly held that it equates different understandings with faithlessness. The history of the church is replete with instances of separation, excommunication, and schism. While some of these have been necessary to faithful proclamation of the gospel, many have been tragic impediments to the church's witness. But how can seemingly endless conversation with those who are not only "wrong" but also "unfaithful" do anything but threaten both truth and faithfulness? Bearing witness to one's own perception of truth may make it possible, when an impasse occurs, to set aside the particular disagreement for

a time so that other, related issues can be explored. Such explorations may lead to new perspectives on old disputes. At any rate, patience is a fruit of the Spirit, while factions are a work of the flesh (Gal. 5:16–26).

Talking about God

Committed conversation, while necessary to shared life in community, is not sufficient to produce shared life in the community of faith. The mere act of talking with one another, even when such talking is marked by fidelity to conviction and fidelity to others, is unlikely to lead beyond polite disagreement unless the very subject of committed conversation is transformed.

Jesus did not talk with the Pharisees about proper and improper observance of Sabbath regulations and practices. Rather, he transformed the issue by talking about *God* and about *God's Way* within creation (Mark 2:23–28). Jesus did not debate the merits of fasting as a form of faithfulness. Instead, he transfigured the disagreement by proclaiming the joy of *God's* new presence in the world (Mark 2:18–20). Jesus did not engage in an extended conversation about the place of ritual purity in everyday life. He spoke instead about the good news of *God's* movement among people (Mark 2:15–17). In short, Jesus transformed disagreements about forms of faithfulness into new apprehensions of *God* and *God's Way* in the world.

Only if the first commitment of committed conversation is to God, and only if God is the primary subject of committed conversation, will the church be able to move beyond “interminable disagreements.” The church is a community of faith in *God*, a community of trust in *God's Way* in the world. Thus, any exploration of forms of faithfulness to God must move beyond disputes over forms of faithfulness to mutual apprehensions of the One to whom we are faithful. Faith is prior to theology, and theology is prior to morality.

A striking feature of contemporary moral utterance in the church is that it is so often indistinguishable from moral utterance in the culture. Whether the issue is abortion or inclusivity, the nature of community or homosexuality, euthanasia or pluralism, the terms of churchly discussion are too often little more than vaguely religious versions of the wrangling within Western liberal culture. If the church is reduced to replicating America's “culture wars” within itself, it should not be surprised that its “dialogue” can find no terminus.

Among the ironies that are ever-present in the church is the reality that our present practice of drawing boundaries within the community of faith mirrors the culture at the very time we sense the necessity of distinguishing Christian belief and practice from the culture's values. Neither the ideology of pluralism nor the retreat into mutually hostile enclaves of conviction provides the church with the capacity to proclaim the good news of God's Way in the world . . . and in the church. Committed conversation may itself serve as a distinguishing mark of God's Way in a fragmented world where shared purpose and mutual commitment are but dim memories. Yet committed conversation within the church will only display God's Way if God is at the center of the conversation as both subject and object of ecclesial discourse. The Christian community proclaims Jesus Christ as Emmanuel—God with us. Therefore, "us" only begins to make sense in light of God.

Notes

1. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.1.9, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1023.
2. *Ibid.*, 4.1.12., 1025f.
3. Jacob Neusner, *From Politics to Piety: The Emergence of Pharisaic Judaism* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973); *Judaism in the Beginning of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).
4. E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983); *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).
5. Neusner, *From Politics to Piety*, 146.
6. See Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 38.
7. James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 71.
8. Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom?* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 107.
9. James D. G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways Between Christianity and Judaism* (London: SCM Press, 1991), 102.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law*, 11f.
12. *Ibid.*, 103.
13. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 7.
14. Dunn, *Partings*, 274.



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