

Being Church: Moving Beyond Tolerance

This paper was prepared by Craig Thompson in dialogue with the Doctrine and Liturgy Committee of the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania

The Purpose of this Paper

This paper is concerned with the *character of the conversation* in the Uniting Church about human sexual ethics – the way in which the matter has been considered and acted upon – and *not* its specific content. As passionate as we may feel about our opinions on any matter which might divide us as a church, we must understand what is at stake in any conversation *within* the church. An awareness of the nature of a properly *Christian* debate is important because moving too quickly to what we *think* a debate is about can result in our identifying the wrong thing as the source of our differences, and so leave us at polar opposites and without any means (or even reason) to be drawn back together again. While the current crisis in the Uniting Church regarding Resolution 84 of the 2003 national Assembly is the occasion for this paper, its argument would be just as pertinent to any crisis of threatened division in the church. The basic concern in this paper is with the question, *how must Christians understand themselves in their disputes with each other?*

The argument of this paper is that the crisis of the threatened splits in the church over sexual ethics is a result of misconceptions about the nature of the church and what we should expect of each other. Put most simply, a divided church is a contradiction in terms, and a denial of the gospel. Church division is possible only when one dimension of what it means to be church is exaggerated at the expense of another. No conclusion can be drawn from this observation as to whose fault these misconceptions are – such accusations are part of the very problem we have in front of us. Thus, the discussion below should not be interpreted to state a case for either the “liberals” or the “conservatives” on sexuality. It simply seeks to illustrate how the current standoff and threatened division springs from a mistake on both sides about what it means to be in relation to each other as church. This error involves focussing on a type of relationship determined by the idea of tolerance, rather than the more appropriate relationship of love.

The Structure of the Paper

The paper is in two parts. The first part identifies two major camps in the current turmoil, both of which apparently misapply ideas of unity and diversity in their own descriptions of the church. In both cases, there is a tendency towards self-sanctification, and an elevation of sanctification over justification. For the purpose of this paper, justification is understood as being the immediate fruit of our response in faith to the gracious call of Christ – “justified by grace through faith”. The focus in justification is on *Christ’s* call to us. Sanctification is understood as the subsequent process of being made in Christ what we are not yet, being conformed to the image of Christ – being changed “from glory to glory”. The focus in sanctification is *our* spoken and enacted response to the call of Christ, although this occurs through the work of the Spirit.

The second part of paper then goes on to suggest a “third way” which in itself does not necessarily require a particular decision one way or the other on sexual ethics, but does provide for a way forward which avoids both the patronising approach of the one camp and the separatist threats of the other.

The use of Language in the Paper

One more point should be made before moving to the analysis. It is worth noting from the outset that the very language by which we describe the alternative positions in the debate itself contributes to our problem of polarisation. “Liberal” is generally understood to be the opposite of “conservative”. Liberals are prone to describe themselves as “mature” and able to move to new understandings, and characterise self-designating “orthodox” conservatives as static traditionalists.

Liberals are characterised by their opponents as reading scripture in the light of social conditions, while conservatives read social conditions in the light of scripture. On the matter of sexuality and ordination, liberals are inclusive of difference opinions – to the extent of seeking to hold even contradictory positions together – but conservatives exclude particular positions or possibilities. Liberals are characterised as “for”, and conservatives as “against”. In each case, the names we use for each other and the positions we ascribe to one another are such that there is already no basis for a real relationship, because we are defined by how we are different. It may well be, of course, that any particular liberal or conservative would deny these caricatures of their position, but it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that when we are massed together the nuances are lost and the language and debate are reduced to the lowest common denominators. Where terms like “liberal” and “conservative” are used in this paper, they should be understood to reflect this common but inadequate understanding, and also understood to be part of what is being critiqued in the discussion.

PART 1 – THE NATURE OF THE CURRENT DIVISION

A. The Argument for Unity in Diversity

Of the two major camps, the first we’ll consider is the *doctrine of unity in diversity*. As already stated, this position suffers from what may be called a tendency to self-sanctification. That is, it is assumed that the collective of individuals who are justified by their response to the call of Jesus is, as such, already well on the way to being the perfected and sanctified church. Sanctification is here understood to be the fruit of diversity, and so there is much talk from this perspective about actively *seeking* and *maintaining* diversity. Diversity itself is seen as a virtue, without due consideration to the type of diversity which is appropriate. Common here are almost triumphalist calls to celebration of the diversity of the church-tolerant and descriptions of such a church as “mature”.

Unit-in-Diversity “Proof Texts”

One serious risk of beginning with a concept of diversity and difference is that we then seek types of “proof texts” to demonstrate that it is theologically sound. Several such proof texts are common here. First, a doctrinal appeal is often made: that we are many and diverse is argued to be a reflection or imaging of the variety of the divine persons of the Trinity. Yet what is more often happening here is that, beginning from an unsophisticated notion of differentiation in the Trinity, the “liberal” infers that the diversity we see among ourselves is a shadow of God’s own diversity. The result is that the variety understood to exist in God is not really the basis for understanding our own variety, but is actually determined by what we think is appropriate variety among ourselves. We effectively create God’s diversity in the image of our own.

A second common proof text here is an appeal to the nature of the church: Paul’s discussion of the diversity and complementarity of the gifts of the Spirit is similarly interpreted in terms of the differences we have among ourselves on matters of doctrine and ethics. Yet Paul’s argument runs in the reverse: the presence of difference and diversity does not indicate the presence of the Spirit; rather, the Spirit creates a type of diversity which is the fruit of its own unique action. While our response in faith to the gracious call of Jesus is tantamount to a justification of the community called, this justification is *in spite* of the differences between the members and not because of them, and is so not yet sanctification.

A third proof text is the use made of the variety of theological viewpoints present in the New Testament itself. This variety becomes the basis for a call to tolerate a variety of viewpoints on particular matters in the life of the church – in this case, sexual ethics. However, while diversity in the New Testament is undeniable, so also is its unity, and it is by no means clear that the type of

tension between the unity and diversity of the scriptures corresponds directly to the type of unity-in-diversity argued for by some in relation to sexual ethics.

Contrary to this ‘liberal’ understanding of diversity and sanctification, the diversity which is appropriate to the life of the church is not simply the diversity which arises from the fact that many hear and respond to the call of Christ. The church is inherently incomplete (we might say “inherently diverse”) on account of the roughness of the diamonds Jesus selects for his crown. *This* kind of diversity, however, is prior to and different from the sanctification and diversity which the gospel itself creates.

Patronising the Other

One subtle effect of such a doctrine of unity in diversity is that it takes on patronizing overtones as it assures its perceived opponents that it understands them, and that its position is not (mutually) exclusive of theirs. *Seeking* diversity as it does, the diversity camp it cannot finally exclude any position, and so must assure itself and others of its inclusiveness. Thus, and paradoxically, a doctrine of unity in diversity such as this cannot accommodate a radically different position without domesticating it and so diminishing its difference. Hence, in our current situation, assurances are offered that ‘right relationships’ is inclusive of ‘celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in marriage’ (CISAFIM), and this becomes the basis of a call to tolerance. It clearly is inclusive in this way from the perspective of a unity-in-diversity position, but ‘right relationships’ is far too broad for CISAFIM itself, and so the assertion of inclusiveness fails to do justice to the concerns of the ‘conservatives’. A parallel at a different level would be Hinduism’s incorporation of Jesus into its pantheon – good for Hinduism, bad for Jesus.

A further effect here is what any split is understood to indicate. ‘We don’t want them to go, but...’ is a response typical of proponents of such a unity-in-diversity, with the presumption being that it is the ‘conservative’ and intolerant minority who separate themselves from the unity -in-diversity majority who are the ones doing the leaving. However, the differential in numbers and institutional presence and power between the groups does not allow us to determine who ‘really’ is leaving and who is staying.

B. The Argument for Ecclesial Purity

On the other hand, there is *a doctrine of ecclesial purity* operating in the arguments of many who reject the unity-in-diversity position. Paradoxically, this also suffers from the problem of self-sanctification, and for the same reason as the contrary position: the church which is justified by its response to the call of Jesus is not yet the sanctified church. (A different and more theologically technical way of putting it would be to observe that both positions suffer from inadequate attention to the *eschatological* character of the church, but this aspect will not be developed explicitly in this paper). The difference between the two positions is that whereas the first infers sanctification from the *presence* of difference, the doctrine of ecclesial purity infers sanctification from the *absence* of such difference – or at least difference on matters regarding the ‘substance of the faith’. The temptation is then to force a sanctification of the church by an excommunicating exclusion of those who are different, or an excommunicating withdrawal-of-self.

‘We don’t want to leave, but...’ becomes the typical response to the tension from this perspective, with the implication being that there *is* somewhere else to go. Yet the ecumenical scandal – the communion without communion which characterises the church catholic today – is the fruit of this type of approach and is effectively the outcome of enforced sanctification – attempts to purify churches in doctrine or practice. Typical here are claims to orthodoxy, in conscious distinction from ‘liberal’ claims to maturity.

The critical question here is the way in which Jesus is understood to be present in the world – first, where we may hear his call and, second the significance, for our own understanding of God, of the fact that *different* persons respond to that call. There is a churchly dimension to our encounter with Jesus, by virtue of *his* faithful commitment to the church, which cannot be avoided by separation from others who also claim to have heard the call of Jesus. We have to make sense of, and live with, the fact that Jesus has the temerity not only to call us but also to call others who do not think like us.

Separation is to be expected if the emphasis shifts too far from *Christ's* calling and naming of us to *our* naming of Christ, for our arguments are at base about how we respond to Christ's call – how we name him in our own words and actions.

PART 2 - A "THIRD WAY": MOVING BEYOND TOLERANCE

The Experience of a Common Call

An over-exuberant liberalism can blur human differences in search of a unity, and an over-exuberant conservatism can exaggerate difference to establish a unity. A "third" way which might be proposed as avoiding the traps of these two alternatives is to focus on the person of Jesus in his address to us as the basis of subverting our inadequate and divisive addressing of each other ("Libertine!" "Legalist!"). This focus means that the first concern is always then what we hear him saying rather than what we say ourselves. Disputes are then properly located in relation to the centre of our faith and existence as church, where they can be tested for their "core" significance.

What we hear Jesus saying is itself arguable. It is, however, the position put here that the first thing he says is "be together in me, despite yourselves". This locates the source of our conflicts not in *our* identities as liberals or legalists or whatever, but in the fact that *Jesus* draws us – liberals and conservatives – together. This suggests that we are at odds with each other precisely because we have a common calling. We are not called *in order* to be in conflict – exactly the opposite is the case – but neither are we sanctified or perfected just because we are called. A continual referral to the fact that we are at odds *because* we have in common our calling would be an important control on what we dare say about each other. The conversation would then take a form in which the real differences are not denied, and yet the common calling is also affirmed. That is to say, the conversation must be liturgical (eucharistic) in character – reflecting that we gather around a common table because we have a common Lord and not because we are in agreement with each other. The test of our health as a community of common call then becomes whether conversation is considered possible after that call. The critical question is whether there is a breaking point at which what we think we have heard Jesus say to us can be the basis of separating ourselves from others who have also claim to have heard Jesus speak.

It is important to note that this "third way" is *not* simply an attempt to bridge between the liberal and conservative alternatives, but is quite a different and independent place to start. The third way is a position from which the other two ways are identified as having in common the confusion of justification and sanctification, and the basis for the critique of tolerance which will be given below. To start with our common call to Jesus is to relativise our attempts to *respond* to that call in our saying who we think Jesus is and who we are (or should be) in our faith-response to him.

Tolerance and Love

How the practice of this "third way" might differ from the current situation may be clarified by drawing a contrast between tolerance and love. Both the unity-in-diversity and the ecclesial purity positions are marked by the question of tolerance (and intolerance). Unity-in-diversity calls for tolerance of the other who also responds to the call of Christ, including tolerance of those who hold

to a very different view. The ecclesial purity position chooses not to tolerate certain understandings or behaviour, and separates itself.

The idea of tolerance, however, is not sufficient to describe the basic Christian ethic, and intolerance is simply a corresponding symptom of this inadequate understanding of how Christians are related to each other. Christian existence is not a matter of tolerance, but of love. The tolerant are *superior* to those they tolerate, as are the intolerant to those to whom they object; it is not so with love. Despite this inadequacy, we nevertheless seem to be caught in the dynamics of tolerance and intolerance in the Uniting Church on this matter – both in the debate as it has been conducted, and the current situation in relation to Resolution 84. The present situation is one in which it is not clear what might happen next. As simply an attempt to reaffirm the status quo, there are no clear outcomes from Resolution 84. *On the one hand*, then, it would seem here that the unity-in-diversity camp has achieved what it desired, which is effectively the denial of the dissenting voices on contemporary sexual ethics. It seems to me that honesty requires the recognition that Resolution 84 is caught in the problem typical of all blanket calls for tolerance: by allowing councils of the church to hold a traditional expectation of its ministers, yet *also* insisting on case-by-case considerations of the merits of each particular minister or candidate, the resolution contradicts itself, and the “conservatives” justifiably reject it. Despite its best intentions, there is no love in the resolution of the otherness of the traditional position which allows it its own integrity.

Difference is acknowledged but it is a difference which must be watered down on account of the fundamentally negative and patronising notion of tolerance. Without a clear indication that the matter is not closed and will continue to be addressed in this or that way in the future, the dissenting voices are reduced to being tolerated and are asked themselves to be tolerant. Superiority-in-tolerance operates here as an inability to exclude those who also name Jesus, but also a refusal or inability to work further on the question of what unites and divides. Critical questions which arise here include whether the resulting ambiguity with respect to sexual ethics then creates an ecclesial and legal problem by which some within the church are less able to articulate freely their perception of what they have heard in their calling to the church. Does this thereby risk the possibility of the church’s not hearing what it might need to hear? Does this potential (or *de facto*) muting of a section in the choir dangerously threaten the integrity of the whole piece?

On the other hand, the maintenance of the status quo threatens to effect a split in the church which amounts to a refusal to tolerate. “Love” may here be conceived of as an act of discipline, but it is loving in the sense in which divorce is marriage. The lover is (at best) “for” the others by being separated from them. Superiority-in-intolerance is expressed here in allowing those left behind to continue to name Jesus but refusing to hear them, because we know better. We may note in this connection, however, that Jesus “disciplined” Israel not by going somewhere else but by refusing to turn from the path to the cross to which his commitment to God *and* Israel led him. A critical question which arises here, then, is whether the threatened self-imposed exile of part the church actually *diminishes* the witness of those exiles, contrary to their expressed desire? Is there really anywhere to go, if those left behind continue to speak the name of Jesus and it is those “co-called” of Jesus who are our primary community, in spite of ourselves?

The Mark of Love

To state it again, Christian existence is not a matter of tolerance, but of love. Tolerance does not involve a joining of one to another, but a mere juxtaposition – a non-involved setting of one next to the other. It is this weakness of tolerance which makes separatist intolerance possible – we are not really joined to those others, so there is really nothing lost if we are separated from them.

Lovers, on the other hand, are neither superior nor inferior but are alongside, inseparably joined to and, what is more important, *marked* by the ones they love. The significance of the marking of the lover by the one she loves is that the lover is affected by the imperfections of the loved – even “*infected*” by those imperfections. Whereas in such situations the natural response is to distance ourselves from the source of infection, the evangelical (small “e”!) response is to recognise that we are ourselves caught up in the failings and afflictions of others. The failings of others affect us, just as do their successes. This is not “theory” about love, but is a *conclusion* of what it is to love, gleaned from what we see in the ministry of Jesus. Jesus *so* identified himself with us that our weaknesses “infected” him to the extent of bringing about his death on a cross. Jesus doesn’t just die *for* our sins, he dies *because* of them, and yet willingly maintains his commitment to us. It is on the basis of his loving joining of himself to us that we can assert that it is by *his* achievements we are saved: infected by us he dies, but now that he is risen from the dead we will also be risen.

The current polarisation on the matter of sexual ethics is the result not so much of beginning with mutually exclusive positions, but the fruit of having begun with the idea in mind that we may come to either denying the integrity of the other by applying a blanket pluralism, or parting company, with it further being assumed that in both cases there would be no real loss of the integrity of the gospel imperative to love. We have reduced love to tolerance, and so can justify intolerance of those who hold strongly to positions different from our own. Unless we question those beginnings in the light of having discovered a common core we will not be able to overcome the gulf, and we will once again fail to meet the imperative to love. It must also be said that it is critical that such a discovery be made, for the pluralist position cannot do justice to the love-needs of the moment, and neither can the purist decision to separate be considered appropriate to the call to love.

Some Conclusions

As stated at the beginning, this paper is concerned with the *character of the conversation* in the Uniting Church about human sexual ethics – the *way* in which the matter has been considered and acted upon, and what has been implicit in how we have dealt with each other. The intention has been simply to clear some space, so that it might be clearer what is at stake in our responses to conversations about controversial matters. The basic argument of the present paper is that the character of our conversations, as a *churchly* conversations, and the types of outcomes we might expect of those conversations, must not be controlled by the *differences* between us but by our answer to the basic question, *what is it we have in common?* This question is *not what do we have in common about sexual ethics (or whatever)*, for such a question jumps in far too early. To ask about what we have in common is to ask what it is which makes this something worth arguing about.

Once what it is we have in common is identified, the follow-up question is, how does that thing determine what can and cannot be said or done in the conversation? I will attempt some very brief answers to these questions.

At base, *what we have in common is the experience of responding in faith to the gracious call of Jesus Christ.* This means that we are in the first instance those who gather around Christ, and not those who have chosen each other. We are, then, simultaneously brought together in Christ and yet likely very different from one another. Jesus himself, as the one who calls us together, is the basis for our being together. At the beginning of his ministry he calls us to himself, and at the end he prays for our unity. As such, Jesus is himself the source of the law that we love each other, for it is he who holds us together in such a close space. The common experience of the call of Jesus, then, is the thing which reveals to us just how different we are, and the thing which compels us to work in the Spirit to overcome those differences.

How does this common experience affect what can and cannot be said or done in our conversations? Theological debate is about the response required of us, given that this Jesus has called us all to himself. The priority of Christ's call for our existence as church, however, leads to this conclusion: if we have Jesus in common as the source of the reconciliation to which we are called, there is no ground for our naming (in words and actions) of Jesus as *reconciler* to be relegated second to any *other* naming of Jesus. The Jesus who we know as reconciler because he calls us to love one another cannot then become the basis for an exclusivist rejection of the other because of some other name we give him, nor can he become the basis for an inclusivist denial of the differences between us. Having been loved, we cannot *not* love in return. We are called *in spite of* our liberality or conservatism – called to Christ and to the love of each other. The consequence of this 'in spite of' is that subsequent divisions on the basis of liberality or conservatism contradict the basis of our relationship to Christ.

None of this should be understood to imply that our theological arguments are not important, or that we should just stop talking about controversial things because they cause such distress and there are other more important things to do. What is at stake in theology is our seeking faithfully and truthfully to speak the name of the one who has spoken our names by calling us to himself. It is this faithful response which is the basis of others also hearing him calling them. That is, evangelism is a product of orthodoxy (literally – 'right praise'). Truthful speaking and acting about God by his people is the way in which God impacts on the world. The point of all that has been said in this paper is simply that a critical part of that truthful speaking and acting ('orthodoxy') is testimony to the fact that Jesus calls us before we theologise in response to him, and this has fundamental significance for the call to unity to those who feel moved to respond to him. Our words and actions about God must be conditioned by the way in which it became possible for us to begin to speak them in the first place: our common call in Christ.

In a limited space such as this, these thoughts are simply an invitation to consider that the first issue to be dealt with in our current situation is not division over sexual ethics at all but the exercise of suspicion about the way in which the problem is actually cast, and the implications of such a casting for other things we confess – the call to 'love' in particular. Exactly what a church might look like which achieves the type of love described here is not entirely clear, other than to say that it will be profoundly conversational and marked by the common experience of our call in Jesus. Whatever the case, we need to discover a way of being church which profoundly joins us to each other in our differences while not denying the extent of those differences. Correspondingly, we need also to recognise that the current and dominant options of pluralism and separatism fall far short of the glory.

This paper is also available at <http://vic.uca.org.au/doclit/ecclesiology.html>

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