

A Personal submission to BFC 6

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The Church, the Bible and Same-sex issues - Disagreement, Unity and
Process

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The letters to the editor in the CM Feb 2, illustrate a lot of disagreement among our readers and the editorial by Henry Krause highlights this reality as well. What are we able to do with these widely divergent convictions in our congregations? I doubt very much that there will be a coming together on the issues surrounding sexual orientation and practice. I do not see the possibility of working out an acceptable compromise on the matter even though we have devoted a number of years of process and study to the issue. At Assembly 2014 the BFC process declared the situation as unresolvable and suggested that our disagreement does not nullify our unity in Christ. However, we did not receive guidance on how we were to understand unity this way; nor were we helped to understand in what ways substantive disagreement does not threaten our unity. This is now the agenda of BFC 6.

A new situation arose at the end of December 2014 when a male couple was married in Saskatchewan. This has led several Area Church leadership circles and MC Canada to draft statements of response to the event. These statements refer to the fact that the Confession of Faith, Article 19 is still our guide in this regard. Actually this complicates the discussion because now someone has to explain in what manner we hold to the Confession without taking some action when the clear statement of the Confession is not adhered to in practice. One letter to the Editor asks the question, "Has the Mennonite Church in Saskatchewan abandoned its statement of faith?" (Feb 2/15)

If the Statement of Faith is viewed as binding on church practice then we have a new problem on our hands, or actually a set of problems. We also confess that we are pacifists but there are many of our members who do not adhere to or hold to pacifism. It is interesting that this reality has not caused an uproar in the churches! We also confess that marriage is to be "for life." This too is being violated again and again and we have many divorced persons in our congregations as well as many remarried persons. Again, there is no hue and cry about this violation of the Confession of Faith.

But in terms of homosexuality, the overstepping of the boundaries is pointed out and we are supposedly being held to account for these violations. And

MC SK in particular is reprimanded for allowing two ministers and the congregation to do something that is not supported in the Confession.

In the same period of time MCBC has issued a statement, "We continue to uphold our Confession of Faith in Mennonite Perspective" with specific reference to Article 19 and the comment that MC Canada continues to uphold the Confession. It might be interesting to hear how MCBC responds to marriages not lasting for life and members not being pacifists. What does upholding the Confession mean in these situations? What does "upholding" the Confession mean in practice?

MCM is also in the process of drafting a response to the churches about this development in Saskatoon. Their draft letter says that the statements in the Confession of Faith "continue to be our guide" but it is not spelled out how this guidance works. Later in the same letter, they speak of "substantial agreement with the Confession of Faith and each tenet therein." The introduction of the adjective "substantial" seems to be a move in the right direction, but this will have to be spelled out in some detail including a possible time frame, perhaps a decade or so, during which congregations simultaneously live in unity and in disagreement by agreeing that disagreement does not nullify our unity.

The MCBC letter also claims that MC Canada has no "intention to make changes to our Confession." I believe this is an accurate representation of MC Canada's position, but that does not do away with the problem. The Confession of Faith may well need to be suspended and eventually revised to depict the reality we are in, and to deal with the crisis we are facing.

These recent developments have come upon us in spite of the BFC process of prayer and discernment and trusting the Spirit for guidance. In fact it seems we are now in a more problematic and difficult set of circumstances than we were earlier and our situation has been complicated by overstepping of the Confession of Faith and by responsive/reactive insistence that we still uphold our Confession of Faith including Article 19 in particular, but with no clarification about a possible response to affirming pastors and congregations other than to say (as the PLC IN SK) said, "Time is needed. Patience is needed. Understanding is needed." However, there is no explanation what the time that is needed for; nor what exercising patience will have as a possible outcome; nor what kind of understanding is needed, given the action of a congregation and its pastors.

I have the impression that some in leadership circles are underplaying the intensity of the disagreement. One statement said, "We find ourselves in disagreement with one another from time to time." The reality as I see it,

and as it is being expressed in recent weeks is that we are in heated disagreement with one another all the time. Whenever the subject comes up. There is no letting up of the pressure. And my impression is that this spirit of disagreement is becoming toxic. What I mean is that we relentlessly despise/look down on those who take a more conservative approach than we do and we relentlessly judge/condemn those who are more liberal and accepting than we want to be.

This climate of judging and despising needs serious attention since it is the sign of ongoing emotional disagreement among members of each congregation, many families and in the area and national church. Does this climate of strident disagreement not call for pastoral response? Since no one is calling for this to be dealt with is our strident disagreement simply being ignored, lamented or condoned?

Regarding the issue itself, I think it is time that we call each other to account when claims for biblical clarity are made when in fact this is not the case. To simply claim "the Bible says" does not suffice, since every one of us who makes such a claim is actually claiming this is what I understand the Bible to say, or this is my interpretation of the texts that deal specifically with homosexuality and this is my interpretation of the development of biblical truth and practice. I am reminded of this statement by G. Irvin Lehmann, "Everyone thinks they take the Bible as it stands when in reality everyone takes the Bible as they understand it." I wonder whether Paul's advice to the Corinthians might be applicable here: "let the others weigh what is said." (1 Cor 14:29) As I understand it, not all comments, opinions and letters to the editor carry the same weight. We are all called into a process of transformation of the mind, that results in "discerning what the will of God is."

It is my impression that the "Paths and Ditches" document produced during the BFC process was designed to accomplish this very goal, but apparently the paths and ditches that were to guide us in interpreting Scripture responsibly and creatively are not being used, or they are not clear enough. If they are clear enough then we need to critique and evaluate statements and positions that are not in keeping with our agreed upon hermeneutical approach.

To make the claim, "the Bible clearly labels homosexual activity as sin" does not give any evidence that the relevant passages nor the tenor of scriptural development have been carefully examined. When such a bold claim is made then it needs to be challenged, "On what basis do you come to this interpretation of the evidence?"

To highlight some of the salient issues, I raise a number of questions:

One, can we agree that biblical truth is not static truth? What I am referring to is that Scripture itself models development and change in a certain direction, not with a list of timeless and abstract rules but with a trajectory of transformation that is in keeping with the clearest revelation we have, namely in Jesus' incarnation, ministry, words and teaching. From this perspective we also get the insight from Jesus that the Spirit would teach yet more truth in time to come. A corollary of this conviction that biblical truth is not static truth is the conviction that not all Scripture carries equal weight. All Scripture is inspired and useful, says Paul, but I believe we need to add, "but not equally so." In other words Scripture needs to be read "with interpretation"; there is no reading without interpretation, but there is considerable misreading and misunderstanding of biblical texts. The Bible is not a simple book and reading it is not a simple matter.

Two, can we agree that the context, the "situated-ness" of every ancient text contributes to a better understanding of its meaning and possible application in our time? Can we further agree that not paying attention to the multi-layered context can easily lead to a misreading of a text? We do need to ask what the original hearers knew and assumed, culturally and religiously, that would give them a certain understanding of what an ancient writer was writing. Another aspect of an ancient text is whether there is any evidence that the ancient writer was in "conversation" and aware of other cultural attitudes of that time and aware of other ancient literature. Were the biblical writers, editors and compilers aware of literature about a flood (Gilgamesh Epic) and the Babylonian creation myth (Enuma Elish) when they wrote the biblical flood story and the biblical creation accounts?

Three, can we agree that some parts of Scripture are not as relevant in our time as they seem to have been in an earlier time? In other words we interpret, weigh and discern these matters. We have done this repeatedly. The four-fold directive of Paul that we greet one another with a "holy kiss" is disregarded in all of our congregations (as far as I know). Somehow we have concluded that the two halves of 1 Cor 11 carry very different weight for us. The first half includes statements about women and hair covering and most of us have ignored these directives even though they are scriptural. We have said they are culturally bound and not universal. The second half of the chapter we have treated quite differently. Here we find the oldest writing about the institution of the Lord's Supper. We cherish and value this part of the chapter and use it in our communion services without question. How have we decided that these two halves of one chapter are to be treated so differently? We have interpreted; we have not taken the whole text exactly

as it is written (neither about the holy kiss nor about women's headcovering).

I suggest the following examples of development within Scripture. First, the exclusionary texts (e.g. "No Ammonite shall enter the assembly") of the Old Testament are not only challenged by Jesus himself and by Paul, but already in the Old Testament writings, namely in Isaiah 56-57 ("Do not let the foreigner say, The Lord will surely separate me from his people") as well as Jonah, and others. Clearly, there are different attitudes toward outsiders at different times. Isaiah and Jonah seem to challenge the exclusiveness of other passages and earlier practice. One of the steps in interpreting this is to ask, how did Jesus deal with this? He insisted that his house should be a place of prayer for "all peoples" and he showed repeatedly that even a descendant of the ancient Canaanites, a woman, is worthy of his attention. In light of this it would not be appropriate to insist that the earlier exclusionary attitude which is part of what the Bible says, does not have ongoing validity for Christ's followers.

The unChristian attitude remains in the OT because the OT is the literary record of a religious people and their culture. Such literature says different things about the same things and does not delete that which preceded the greater truth that developed later.

Second, the attitude expressed in Deuteronomy that obedience leads to blessings in all areas of life (Deut 28:1-14) is not left unchallenged. Experience challenged the straightforward formula of Deut 28. The daring and creative writer of the Job epic presents Job as the most righteous man who in spite of his being super righteous suffered grievously and wrestled with God about this as well as with his friends who insisted that his tragedies were surely attributed to his having sinned. He should only repent and his fortunes would be reversed.

In the course of the epic, the Lord tells Job that his friends have not spoken the truth about the matter. The OT lets these two differing understandings remain standing side by side in the canon. Do we want to simply declare, "Well, the Bible says...?" and agree with the preachers of the prosperity gospel? No, as Christians interpreters we ask whether there is anything in the NT that touches on this issue. Jesus was asked about the same thing in John 9 "Who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?" and Jesus sides with Job and against the Deuteronomic formula. Here is a distinct clue as to how we are to interpret Deut 28 biblically and as Christians.

Third, Luke's extended account of radical change within the Christian community in Acts 10-11 is of particular interest. Peter, inspired and led by the Holy Spirit, stepped beyond the bounds of his upbringing, his tradition, his theology, and his statements of faith, his entire world-view, and did an unheard of thing. After initially refusing ("By no means, Lord") the impetus of the Spirit, he gave in, ("even though he was greatly puzzled") and stepped into the home of Cornelius, a Gentile. He shared the good news with that household, and stayed for several days, sharing board and bed. They responded to his message and the Spirit came upon them even as He had come upon the believers in Jerusalem.

His experience led him to make a most surprising and direction-altering about-face. "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him". His personal experience led to a radical revision of his theology and to his confession of faith! The apostles and believers in Judea heard that even the Gentiles had accepted the word of God and they called him to account. There was personal sharing followed by summation and silence. Praising God followed, "then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life." We know the outcome of his sharing of that experience back in Jerusalem. This was a breakthrough moment. New insight, new conviction, new confession of faith! Resistance followed and even backsliding, but the truth stated here came to be recognized as Christian truth! (in spite of serious objections by many believers.)

I agree with the person who wrote, "What bothers me is the attitude that the way we've understood the Bible, the way we were taught the Bible, is somehow what we are stuck with. The Bible itself models "unlearning" and coming to fresh, Spirit-inspired insights and convictions."

We have found again and again that positions of certainty have led to simple declarations about what the Bible teaches that are actually repetitions of previously held convictions and cliches, without having taken the time and the effort to revisit the claims that are being made in the light of the actual situation in which texts were first written and the culture in which they were first understood. So when some letters to the Editor contain the claim "the Bible clearly teaches" this or that, without having re-examined the relevant texts carefully, then I am reluctant to accept that confident claim as Christian truth.

This means we have to consider the fact that the word "homosexuality" is not found in any of the ancient manuscripts; nor does the KJV of 1611 contain the word. Apparently the first use of it is found in the RSV of 1946.

Frequently the Sodom and Gomorrah narrative is appealed to but within the OT the sin of Sodom is not equated with homosexuals. Ezekiel names the lack of hospitality as the sin of Sodom, not homosexuality. Even literalists do not insist that homosexuals ought to be put to death as Leviticus states. It seems that the concept of same-sex behavior in the Bible is sexual excess not sexual orientation. Some who oppose the practice of homosexuality but not the orientation, want to insist that those with this orientation must then remain celibate. Is this not in opposition to Paul and Jesus' teaching that celibacy is a gift that not all have and that celibacy is not a mandate for a special group of people. When the six biblical texts are considered within their ancient contexts, their social context and their literary context then the case against homosexuality is not nearly as clear as we may have thought it was. We cannot claim that our interpretation is biblical teaching unless we actually undertake a study of the passages with eyes wide open to the reality of contextual matters that influenced ancient writers and that the convictional disposition of current readers also influence how these texts are understood. We all take the Bible not as it is but as we understand it.

I find the suggestion of Gordon Fee helpful, "Since the Bible is for all, let all read it for life and growth, but let us read it intelligently, not willy-nilly or with a kind of laziness that gives credit to the Holy Spirit for every imaginable wrong interpretation of a text simply because we are too lazy to do the hard work of study." (How to Read the Bible for all its Worth, 1981)

It would be helpful for all of us to reread Loren L. Johns case study on Homosexuality and the Bible. He has considered all of the relevant texts carefully in parallel columns. (2005) The study by Matthew Vine, God and the Gay Christian is also worthwhile.

Over the centuries it has become evident again and again that our understanding of biblical truth has changed and developed; previous rock-solid positions against this or that, were actually changed even though there was rigorous defence of the previous position, the status quo. The issue of slavery about 150 years ago is a case in point. Scripture was used to justify the enslavement of Negroes. The church came to change its understanding of previously clear statements and rejected them in the light of Jesus and the NT. Our understanding of biblical/christian truth has not remained static and it is not set in stone.

Sometimes change came because of scientific discovery, like Galileo's claim of heliocentrism. The church, via the Inquisition resisted him and condemned his view as being anti-Scripture but eventually had to concede that the cosmology of ancient people was out of date and had to be

discarded. Galileo was right and the church's position on the matter was wrong.

At other times, such as during the Reformation radical change came about because of scriptural study as was the case with Martin Luther with Paul's letter to the Romans or Anabaptists like Grebel and Menno Simons and their rereading the Bible in regard to baptism and the Lord's Supper.

The Bible is not a time-less, context-less book that we apply to our time without reflection and serious wrestling. Much rather, biblical truth is embryonic truth that needs to be nurtured and considered and developed over time, in each new cultural situation. Not all the implications of the gospel are found within the pages of the Bible. It seems to me that the gospel has slowly permeated history and society and transforms society in fresh ways. The seeds that eventually led to the abolition of slavery and the subjugation of women were planted by Jesus in the gospel and bore fruit.

We do not simply repeat what was earlier assumed and believed and insist that it is true because it was in the Bible. Too often the claim "the Bible says" was a cover-up for "this is how I understand the Bible." We also need to identify fundamentalism of the last century and its resultant biblicism as a prime factor in how the Bible has been read and often misunderstood. The Bible itself models development and change. The Bible itself models differences and tensions, debate on issues and eventually clarification and new understanding.

Interpretation, disagreement and Unity

Since all Bible reading involves interpretation we will have differences of opinion and conviction about things that matter to us. We have had different understandings of the Lord Supper and the form of baptism and of church structures. At this time the issue that tests our unity is the question of homosexuality and same sex marriages. Walter Wink wrote, "The issue of homosexuality threatens to fracture whole denominations." Within our own denomination many families and individuals have wrestled with this issue. We need to give careful attention to the reality of radical disagreement and our simultaneous claim that disagreement does not nullify our unity in Christ. The fact of the matter is though that it does seem to invalidate our claims of unity as well as the relevance of statements in our Confession of Faith. Our claims of being one in Christ and our claim of upholding our Confession of Faith have begun to sound rather hollow and unconvincing. BFC 6 has invited the church to consider that our disagreement on these matters does not nullify our unity.

In the following section I want to reprint part of two lectures I gave at a conference in 2005. The overall title of the lectures was: "The Church and its Leaders: Unity, Diversity and Conflict."

I want to share three things: an understanding of unity, an approach to disagreement without nullifying unity, and finally, a suggestion about how we might proceed from this point forward.

Exploring Scripture on the theme of unity

A good place to begin is to consider **Jesus' prayer in John 17** in which he prays for his immediate followers as well as for all those who follow them. After having had an extended farewell conversation with his closest friends, (John 14-16) Jesus prays in their presence and intercedes for them. In this prayer, it is worth noting that Jesus mentions the topic of unity, oneness, five times, "**that they may all be one.**" (11, 21, 22, 23). When we notice things being repeated in a text we usually pay careful attention.

Repetition certainly signals emphasis and importance but it may also signal something else. After three years of working with the disciples as their rabbi, Jesus knew that this theme had to be stressed because he had seen too much evidence of discord, disunity and even squabbling among them. In his prayer and in their hearing he stepped on their toes with painful reminders that there was work to be done. They were called to be leaders in the church he had come to build, they had learned from him for about three years, but they were not done learning yet. His concern was for unity, but again and again problems surfaced, showing clearly that there was lots of room left for growth and transformation.

The impact of this five-fold emphasis on their being one had not really struck me before. The **problems among the disciples were rooted in their diversity**, the diversity they brought with them when they were first chosen. When Jesus chose those twelve to be with him and to serve him, he did not select a homogeneous group in which sameness, harmony and being of one mind would come easy.

He picked rugged, weather-beaten fishermen who had battled the storms on the Sea of Galilee, as well as a Zealot named Simon who belonged to a group committed to eradicating the Roman occupiers of Palestine. He also chose Matthew, a tax collector, who was an employee of the Roman government. He chose two brothers who were nicknamed the Sons of Thunder, who were quick to act in decisive ways if things didn't go well, as well as John who seems to have had a gentler disposition and the mind of a

poet; and of course, there was Peter who was quick to answer, quick to promise loyalty and just as quick to deny that he even knew him.

Can we imagine these very different men as leaders in the church? I am sure the sparks would often fly when they got together. No wonder Jesus felt he had to pray for them!

His concern regarding unity in the church and among its leaders was also linked to a number of issues that had already surfaced.

Recall the incident when James and John (Mark 10) approached Jesus with a special request, asking for preferential treatment and important positions in the coming kingdom. Jesus rebuked them for having asked for the favor, and notice what Mark says, "the ten began **to be angry** with James and John when they heard about it." A split in the ranks, ten versus two. Tension. That was when Jesus stepped in with corrective teaching: "If you want to really be important then learn to be a servant!" No wonder Jesus prayed for them.

Another example is found in Mark 9. They stopped in a house in Capernaum and Jesus asked them a surprising question, "What were you **arguing** about on the way?" Their response? No comment. Silence. No one wanted to admit what had been going on. Mark puts it this way, "But they were silent, for on the way, as they were walking along, they had been arguing with one another as to who was the greatest." (9:33-34)

What have we found here? A group of leaders arguing about who really had the most clout! You and I can imagine leaders thinking that question, wondering to themselves where they stood in the pecking order, in the hierarchy of influence, but to actually argue about it out loud, that goes too far!

Repeating something, even five times, is one thing, but even repetition of the phrase, "that they may be one" does not automatically ensure that we actually understand what Jesus may have meant. What is repeated here is not made entirely clear by repetition. How did Jesus understand unity?

He compared his relationship with the Father as being the model for unity. One is the Father, the other the Son, and they are different persons of the trinity, yet they were one. Does this mean one in purpose or mission?

Another question came to mind: I wondered how Jesus' prayer was actually answered in the later experience of the disciples, and in the life of the early church.

When we leave the prayer room that is "John Seventeen" (as Eugene Peterson puts it) in which Jesus expresses his heartfelt desire for his followers to the Father, and scan other texts on the same theme to see how this theme was picked up and developed after Jesus' departure. We notice two things: sometimes unity is spoken of as a given and sometimes as a goal.

Unity is a given, a present fact ...

"*Maintain the unity in the bond of peace. There is one body...* Eph 4:3-4

"Those who believed *were of one heart and soul*." Acts 4:32

"we though many, *are one body* in Christ" Romans 12:5

"you *are all one* in Christ."
-Gal 3:28

Yet unity remains a goal, something to strive for...

"*Until we all attain to the unity of the faith.*" -Eph 4:13

Now in those days ... the Hellenists *murmured against* the Hebrews.
-Acts 6:1

"Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Why do you despise your brother?"
-Romans 14:10

"But if you bite and devour one another take heed that you are not consumed by one another."
-Gal 5:14

"*I appeal to you... that all of you agree* and that there be no dissensions among you."
-1 Cor 1:10

Since unity remains a goal, Jesus prayer is still being answered among us, "I pray that they may all be one, even as we are one ... that they may become perfectly one." (John 17)

In all of these passages the oneness that was prayed for on behalf of the immediate disciples and extended to all those who would believe in his name (including us) is viewed as an already-given gift, an endowment of the church by the Holy Spirit, in answer to Jesus' intercessory prayer.

But oneness as a gift is not only a gift that needs to be accepted, it is a gift that demands participation. This comes through in several texts where unity or oneness is not understood as a given, but as a goal; it is already among us in the church, but it is not ever among us to the degree that it could be. We receive the gift of oneness on the one hand, but then are immediately challenged to work toward that which we have just been given. Praying for unity does not ensure unity, it will also demand deliberate work, specific steps on our part.

Unity is both, an amazing and surprising gift of God's grace to the church, and it remains a life-long challenge that engages our energies and commitment for as long as we serve.

Growing out of Jesus' prayer and our understanding of unity as both a given and a goal, we ask the question, how was Jesus' prayer for unity answered in the decades that followed?

Jesus' prayer did not seem to have very positive results when it came down to the situation in Corinth, for example. Paul was one who declared oneness as a given by the grace of God, but he realized all too quickly that this prayed-for gift needed constant attention; those who had supposedly received the gift were not very effective in implementing it in their fellowship. In the Corinthian letters the theme of unity has to be viewed against the day to day reality of a diverse and deeply conflicted group of believers.

In order to explore these themes in context I have chosen to refer to two first century churches, one in Corinth and the other in Rome.

In both of these letters Paul proclaims the gospel, the good news of God's provision through Christ. When the gospel is received in faith, it must be assimilated into one's lifestyle, into one's thinking, and as we will see, faith

in Christ must also shape the actual practice of being the Body of Christ on earth.

One of the ways in which this concern for fully digesting and incorporating the gospel in our lives, comes through in Romans 12:2, where he expresses his appeal in these words, – “that they be transformed by the renewal of their minds” , (the sense of the Gk verb is “keep on being transformed.”) The reshaping of our Christian imagination has no end, and the way in which our discipleship is expressed keeps on being transformed.

We want to pay particular attention to how Paul reshapes our understanding of church, unity, diversity and conflict. Paul challenges us to think in new ways and then to express these new ways within the Body.

- How did the Lord’s gift of unity fare in settings of diversity?
- How did Paul respond to the evidence of disunity in the church?
- How does Paul redefine our notions about leaders and leadership?
- How does Paul advise us about dealing with conflict?

Let’s consider Corinth first: Paul affirms them wholeheartedly in 1:1-9, even to the point of saying, “they were not lacking in any spiritual gift” and right on the heels of this encouraging word, in 1:10 he confronts them sharply with the disunity evident in their fellowship, and appeals to them to be united.

Listen to his urgent appeal, “that all of you be in agreement, that there be no divisions among you, that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.” He uses five different expressions to highlight the issue that has arisen in the church!

Clearly the gift of oneness was not being implemented among them. He spends the rest of the first four chapters dealing directly with this issue. In ch 3:1 he goes so far as to label those who are not in unity as still “being of the flesh”, and as “infants in Christ” i.e. as still immature. He wrote, “as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving according to human inclinations?” (3:3-4)

What had they been doing? Well, it was like a four party political rally – members carrying placards promoting their favorite leader: “I belong to Paul”, “I belong to Apollos”, “I belong to Cephas”, and “I belong to Christ”.

What is implied by these names? The first group said, “We are for the founding pastor of the church, Paul.” The second, “I belong to Apollos” the *Reiseprediger* from North Africa, who was eloquent in speech, an orator! In Acts 18 he is introduced as having “burning enthusiasm”. Today we would

say, he was a charismatic, he knew his Bible and he spoke with conviction. He's their man.

Still others said, "We belong to Cephas" – who reminds us of the Jewish roots and the strong traditions of our faith. And then there were the super spiritual fundamentalists, the purists. Enough of this naming of mere human leaders, they said! "We belong to Christ" alone. No human leader will do.

The quarrelling and placard waving got heated up to the point where it meant that if I'm for this one, then I'm actually against the others. I'm willing to declare this publically – who I'm in favor of, whom I can't stand.

What a messy and conflicted situation! As Paul deals with it he asks them questions that show that in part the disunity among them is rooted in an inadequate or false view of leadership. "Who then is Apollos? Who is Paul?" They are merely servants through whom they believed "as the Lord assigned to each." One plants, one waters, but God gives the increase.

There is diversity of giftedness and calling in the church, as well as a bedrock of unity. Each leader with his/her unique gifts and strengths is actually serving God, and each is dependent on God for growth as the outcome of ministry. Then he adds another phrase which goes to the heart of the matter – as a team of diversely gifted leaders they have a common purpose, and they work together. (3:5-9) Various gifted leaders are not in competition with each other! They are diverse but they are not divided in purpose; they are differently gifted to be sure, but they do not work at cross-purposes; they work together! This view of leaders and their complementary functions calls for a transformation in their thinking then, and of ours today. Let him who has ears, hear what the Spirit is saying.

Paul compares the church to a garden ("you are God's field). In a garden plot there is variety – veggies of all sorts, flowers of many kinds, maybe some fruits and probably some weeds. Veggies mature at different rates and are harvested accordingly, flowers bloom at different times during the summer and each is appreciated during its prime. The gardener exults in the variety that is growing in the same soil and the diversity nurtured by the same rain and the same nutrients. Gardeners do not rejoice when they have sameness, one row a spitting image of the others, all ripening at the same time.

Paul says that the church is God's field! First of course, this suggests that the church is never any leader's possession; the church is God's! Secondly, the church as God's field, emphasizes diversity. Within the church as well as among its leaders, sameness and repetition is not what God is after. If we

take the garden image seriously then oneness in the church, unity cannot mean sameness. The church as a garden does not glory in sameness and repetition. God specializes in diversity and celebrates it. Just as there are varieties of plants and flowers in every garden plot, there is diversity, there are differences and variations in the church.

Paul's image of the church as garden does not encourage us to bemoan or lament the differences that show up in church. Corinth had a number of down-to-earth differences: some slaves, some free, some Jewish background, some others, some powerful, others essentially nobodies, some wise, others simple, some with previous involvement in the mystery religions of the first century, others quite unreligious.

Each of them brought their background to the fellowship, and interacted with each other, expressing their quite different tastes, attitudes and preferences. Instead of lamenting this, Paul rejoiced in it – in spite of his strict Pharisaic upbringing – and urged the church to accept its diversity, to celebrate it and work with it tirelessly. Instead of wanting to eradicate the diversity in their midst, Paul urged them to accept it as God's gracious gift and work with it.

Where is the unity to be found among this spiraling diversity? In the soil, in the foundation – all have responded to the call of Christ; the soil that sustained them all was a unifying trait, providing nutrients, the possibility of growth for all the plants growing there; everyone shared in their dependence on God, for rain and the blessings of growth and increasing maturity.

Jesus did not aim to have all of his disciples be like Peter, or like Thomas or like John. He cherished their individuality, even their problematic traits and their idiosyncrasies, and used them to further his kingdom work on earth.

Paul did not create homogeneous congregations with everyone having the same background and culture. It might have been less of a hassle to have separate fellowships for those of Jewish background and those of non-Jewish background, but nowhere did he create such a church. He might have had fewer hassles to work with if he had formed fellowships of those who were all slaves and others with those who were freedmen, but nowhere did he create such a church.

Jesus had taught and modeled that everyone was welcome at his table, and Paul learned it well. Even though he was a Pharisee of the Pharisees who knew where to draw lines showing who was in and who was not in, Paul learned from his master that the long-standing dividing walls of culture and tradition were no longer to be key determining factors. In Christ the enthusiastic acceptance of all who responded to the gospel call became the

new norm. That brought diversity into every fellowship and made oneness and unity an ever present goal to be worked at. The image of the church as God's garden did that. May our minds be transformed by this spirit-inspired metaphor!

Later in the same letter, Paul uses the human body (1 Cor 12) as another metaphor for the church. And again, as with the garden image, diversity is affirmed, differences are highlighted, and organic oneness and harmony of purpose is celebrated. He introduces the body metaphor by mentioning varieties of gifts, services and activities in the church, and it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. (12:4-6) This is followed by a more specific enumeration of what he means: utterance of wisdom, utterance of knowledge, faith, gifts of healing, working of miracles, prophecy, discernment of spirits, tongues, interpreting of tongues – an abundance of variety in the expression of the gifts of the spirit in the church. Endless variety to be sure, but he insists they are all given by the same Spirit, and they are all given for the common good.

Then follows the body metaphor (12:12-31). Diversity of members in the human body; not sameness. No body member, no part can say or think, I don't belong because I'm not this or that; no part can say, I don't need that other part, that member or that gift, I'll get along well without it.

No, Paul affirms diversity in the body and in the church and says that God designed it so, so that there is a true sense of interdependence and mutuality. All members matter, everyone's gift, no matter how small, matters. Knowing that diversity tends to divide he mentions this danger directly – "let there be no dissension within the body. Care for one another, suffer with one another, rejoice with one another."

What a powerful image of the church! Diversity and differences are strongly affirmed and applauded; diversity and differences are not denied, they are not silenced, they are not swept under the rug. Dissension is seen as a real danger but it is to be warded off. We are to grow in our understanding to see unity and oneness in this 'organismic' way and then practice being church in this Spirit-led direction.

The Corinthians saw different leadership styles and gifts as the basis for conflict and competition and comparison, but Paul insists that the differences among leaders and the differences in the body of Christ are for the enrichment of the church; in fact they are to be celebrated and affirmed, not lamented. Being identical is not the goal, being faithful to one's calling is the expectation.

Diversity in the body implies conflict, including conflict between leaders

The diversity that Paul affirms and encourages in his letter to Corinth has its inevitable developments or outcomes. This showed up in the mother church in Jerusalem according to Acts 15. The church had sent Paul and Barnabas on their missionary journey and they returned with the stories of Gentiles having been given salvation and having come into the church. This was a source of discomfort for some believers who cherished their Jewish history, traditions and practices. Apparently they felt so strongly about it that they travelled to the new mission churches, probably to Antioch (Acts 14:24-28) and insisted that they would need to abide by Jewish regulations, including circumcision if they really wanted to be saved and on the same level as they.

Have you noticed that in Acts the conflict rooted in diversity was actually a conflict between leaders, between Paul and Barnabas and these others from Judea who taught in the church, (could these have been lay leaders challenging the apostles)? The result of getting contradictory messages from persons in leadership caused quite a stir in the leadership circle and for the whole church.

Luke writes that the conflict between leaders became heated, "Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate (*sharp dispute and debate*, NIV, *fierce protest*, The Message, *eine heftige Auseinandersetzung*, Gute Nachricht) with them." (Acts 15:2)

They decided to resolve the matter by going to the larger church, the sending church in Jerusalem rather than try to resolve it in Lystra, Iconium or Antioch or wherever. At the leadership council some believing Pharisees insisted on the necessity of keeping the law of Moses; there was much debate; they also listened to the testimonies of Paul and Barnabas, and the sharing of Peter. There was sharing of texts and testimonies; there was careful listening and in the end James, the leader of the meeting, provided a summary.

James reviewed the testimony of Peter and Paul and Barnabas and then appealed to the witness of Scripture that supported their non-traditional experiences. This may well have surprised the believing Pharisees who also had their texts in line with the more traditional and confining view on the matter. James quoted the prophetic voice (Acts 15:16-18) which had been overlooked, ignored or deliberately silenced by the tradition of the Pharisees and reminded the whole church that God's original intention was that "all other peoples may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles." I find this to be utterly amazing and profoundly instructive.

This incident portrays something that is still true in our experience. When we adopt a defensive stance about our own convictions and practice we find and use texts that support us, and may well choose to overlook other voices in Scripture that actually challenge us. Certainly there were texts that supported the more conservative convictions of the believing Pharisees, but there were also biblical voices that were much more inclusive and affirming than what they felt comfortable with. In situations of diversity and conflict we notice and appeal to those texts that support our position or argument and overlook or ignore texts that take a slightly different view or are in tension with what we believe. Each of us, no matter where we are on the spectrum of understanding and conviction regarding same-sex relations are selective and highlight texts that strengthen our position and possibly raise questions about others' convictions.

What James modeled here is that though he was fully aware of the narrower outlook in his theological tradition, the tradition that stressed separation and exclusion, he was also aware of the teaching of Isaiah and the example of Jesus, who practiced remarkable openness to those considered unacceptable and unworthy of inclusion. Jesus actually quoted from Isaiah 56 when he cleansed the temple (Mt 21:13). Jesus chose the inclusionary strand from the Old Testament and rejected the exclusionary one.

James' summary speech was in harmony with the Spirit of Jesus on this contentious issue. He declared a new consensus, "It seemed good to the Spirit and to us." (Acts 15:28) This became part of the official letter the church sent to the new believers, clarifying the resolution of the issue. The process of transformation happened through debate, through testimony and through listening to all the voices of Scripture and discerning which voices in the first Testament were affirmed by Jesus and which were not. What James seems to have detected was a certain trajectory of development that was in harmony with the teaching, example and Spirit of Jesus. This peculiar trajectory of development became the norm by which other scriptural voices were assessed. The trajectory of development was the basis on which certain beliefs, contrary to their tradition and beliefs, were now understood to be Christian and of greater significance than other voices or attitudes preserved in earlier texts. This was how previous understandings, earlier convictions were actually deemed inadequate for the present time.

This approach to Scripture arising out of a conflict situation illustrates that our customary readings of the biblical text may well need to be revised in the light of new circumstances, situations, experiences and insights. What did James do with the creative tension found in the Old Testament – to be exclusionary or inclusionary? He practiced spirit-led discernment and gave a new interpretation that was in harmony with Jesus' example and teaching.

Contemporary conflict situations, including the same-sex issue, in the church certainly challenge us to give careful attention to the whole Bible and to hear God's voice afresh. Let him who has ears to hear, hear what the Spirit is saying to the church!

On the basis of this process, (sometimes a heated debate) of reviewing Scripture, tradition and hearing testimonies of the 'new things' God was doing among the Gentiles, the church's convictions and insights were altered and its practice was modified. The kind of transformation, the renewal of the mind, that Paul wrote about in Romans 12 actually happened at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) and God's original intention and will was more clearly understood than it had been earlier!

Differences among us today also leads to conflict

Just as there were specific differences in the church in Corinth, so there are very specific differences in our congregations. Some of these are ethical attitudes and practice, some have to do with matters of belief (view of Scripture, conversion, eschatology) some have to do with the way in which congregational life is practiced (worship options: singing, hymnbooks or choruses, kinds of accompaniment, curriculum choices for SS, who leads this or that, how we practice baptism and communion and weddings) some have to do with personal traits (some are exuberant while others are low-key and more reserved, some pray freely in public, others do not, some are outgoing to newcomers, while others are more reserved, some seem to handle diversity more easily than others. All of these issues will continue to be issues in our churches but the key issues for us at this time have to do with same sex relationships and how we deal with them.

The diversity among us is here to stay and we will need to learn to deal with it. Often differences lead to disagreements, and develop into confrontation and erupt into conflict. Some of these conflicts can be resolved: one gives in, a compromise is worked out, or you decide to disagree agreeably. If we practice the fruit of the Spirit in these situations we will bring "patience (not impatience) , kindness (rather than harshness) , generosity (rather than narrowness) , love (rather than indifference) and self-control (rather than emotionally-shaped responses) " into the picture. If the "works of the flesh", i.e. our human nature outside of the influence of God's Spirit surfaces, then we will become aware of "jealousy, strife, anger, quarrels, factions and envy." (Galatians 5: 16-26)

Does the Bible have any specific guidance on how we are to live with diversity and its inevitable outcome, conflict? Is there more than Paul's overall admonition that we are to "live by and be guided by the Spirit?"

Dealing with diversity in the church

I am thankful that Paul said more on this subject than simply to urge them to live by the Spirit. The key passage is found in Romans 14:1-15:7. This is a classic text with practical insight and guidance on how diverse groups (and individuals) should relate to each other.

The diversity that he deals with here is that some are vegetarians while others eat meat. He calls those who limit their diet to vegetables "the weak" and those who eat meat as well as vegetables, "the strong." This difference became the focus of conflict in the Roman house churches.

What Paul advises is amazing. This is the only passage I have found in the Bible in which the inner attitudes, the emotions, accompanying a particular position are named. And it applies to other examples than the one he deals with in this passage.

Paul asserts that in conflict situations two attitudes and their accompanying emotions dominate. Those who are more conservative on an issue "pass judgment" on the others; and those who are more liberal on an issue "despise" the more conservative brothers and sisters.

This is particularly insightful. Paul names what is going on inside the heart and mind of those engulfed in conflict. On most issues there are those who are more conservative and those who are more liberal, and repeatedly the more conservative tend to judge those who differ from them and those who are more open-minded or liberal, tend to despise those who differ. This is true to our experience, isn't it?

Paul doesn't support one side versus the other. He challenges both sides of the conflict with similar questions, "Why do you despise?" and "Why do you judge?" We don't know how the Romans responded to these rhetorical questions, but it is clear that he actually expected them to give this some conscious attention.

How would we respond to Paul's question? I don't know, but I have a suspicion that the answer would be the same from both sides: we do despise, the narrow-minded believers, the less mature believers who aren't yet with the program, and the underlying reason for despising is that we want them all to conform to our position.

When we judge those who are on the more liberal side of an issue, the underlying reason for our judging is that we want them all to agree with us.

Both sides of the conflict want to enforce conformity. But we have already seen that conformity is not what is seen as the ideal, the norm for the church. The images of the church as garden and body celebrate diversity rather than conformity!

What Paul proposes as an alternative is this: "Welcome one another therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, to the glory of God." (15:7) He intends more than that we tolerate those who are different; he is calling for enthusiastic, whole-hearted acceptance of those who are of a different opinion than we.

"One another" embraces the diverse groups and opinions and level of discipleship in the church, no exceptions, no exclusions, no if's or but's. His "one another" includes those whom we would consider either too liberal or too conservative for our own liking. Neither end of the spectrum is excluded.

This amazing transformation is to be happening "for the glory of God." Whatever is required of us in a conflict situation, no matter how complicated or how difficult it is, no matter how much we struggle with it, it is to be done for the glory of God. Not for our own glory, not to prove that we are right and someone else is wrong; not for the sake of keeping the church homogeneous, but for the glory of God, who loves diversity.

When we study this passage we notice several other things: there is an emphasis on individual responsibility ("each one is fully convinced," 14:5, "each of us gives account of himself to God," 14:12, "your own conviction before God" 14:22.)

There is also an emphasis on community, "let us stop passing judgment on each other" 14:13, "do not destroy your brother or sister" 14:15, "each please the neighbor for his good, build him up" 15:2.

It is also clear that he assumes that faith touches the nitty-gritty aspects of life, like eating or observing days, etc. "some believe in eating anything" the meat eater, thanks God, the abstainer thanks God."

In our present context the practical issue is the spectrum of conviction, attitude and experience relating to same-sex relations within the church.

Paul mixes the practical and the theological, he also brings into the discussion the mind, convictions, emotions, as well as actions and worship. He does not erase the difference between the individual and the community. He uses the ends of the spectrum, the most extreme diversity, to make his point. Three times he urges them, "Welcome each other." The impression I

get is this: he challenges the church to practice vigorous tolerance based on strong convictions. Paul also releases everyone from the need to conform and the need to enforce conformity. (Robert Jewett)

Suggestions for going forward

Building on the paradigmatic narrative in Acts 10-11 I would like to suggest that we, like Peter do what we had never seriously considered before; that we dare to do what seems right according to the Spirit of Jesus even though it seems contrary to our upbringing, our tradition, our theology and our Confession of Faith; that we dare to do what seems puzzling to us and very risky; that we dare to move forward as Peter did, "without hesitation" into new territory and new experiences. Doing such a daring risky thing will involve us in further serious debate, sharing of our experiences and further examination of Scripture and the needs of our time.

Quite specifically, I suggest that in the light of the whole spectrum of conviction on this matter, we devote ourselves to unity as a gift and a goal and to the celebration of diversity; that we give up needing to have everyone conform to our own understandings on the basis of all of us having been graciously welcomed by Christ.

This posture and commitment may also lead us to the insight that the Confession of Faith, Article 19, no longer serves the needs of the church as well as it ought to and that we give up insisting we are upholding the Confession of Faith when we know it isn't serving our needs.

We will give each congregation the freedom to proceed with these issues at their own pace and according to their own readiness. We will willingly share with each other in our Area Churches and in MC Canada what actions we are undertaking and commit ourselves not to despise or condemn the actions that others are taking. In due time, perhaps a decade or so, the question of revising the Confession of Faith may arise and be dealt with appropriately.

Sincerely,

John H Neufeld

