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Editorial: Reflections on the Bond of Communion and Unity

Pierre Berthoud

In 2015, the general synod of a main historical denomination in France decided to allow the local churches to bless same gender couples who had been legally married (which is possible since 2013). The separation of Church and State in France implies that churches can only sanction binding and legal marriages. It follows that the majority of the French Protestants consider the religious ceremony more as a blessing, while the Roman Catholics would consider it as a sacrament.

As one can imagine, this decision by the general synod of a major denomination in the country created quite a stir. Although each local council of elders and pastor has freedom whether or not to implement this practice, the decision meant that the denomination actually recognised same gender unions as a valid form of marriage. It was indeed a historical event in so far as this church broke away from one of the major and unique positions and contributions to both private and public ethics made by the Judeo-Christian tradition as inspired by Scripture. Many Roman Catholics, Reformed, Lutherans and Evangelicals were shocked and dismayed by this decision. In fact, this standpoint was most divisive within and beyond the church. As a consequence, an Evangelical movement arose within the denomination that emphasizes with compassion the classical biblical position on the issue at hand, seeks to clarify its doctrinal stand and organizes itself so as to have an impact on church policies.

In Aix-en-Provence where I live, representatives of the local churches – including those of the denomination that is in favour of the blessing of same gender married couples – meet regularly and the majority of the pastors and institutional leaders (15 to 20) attend these meetings. They decided to take some time to study the issue. Over the years the general atmosphere among the churches and Christian institutions in Aix has been good and fraternal; a diversity of joint activities (Gospel proclamation, cultural and social events) has taken place

in the city. Eventually, after more than two years of discussion, a large majority of the representatives of local churches and institutions adopted a carefully worded and compassionate resolution that upholds the classical and biblical view of marriage and appended it to the internal rules and regulations of the Association, the legal setting of their joint actions.

The local church, affiliated to the denomination in question, responded quite vigorously to the resolution of the Association. It understood the resolution as intolerant and as a means to exercise pressure to reject the freedom of interpretation and understanding of the Scriptures on such issues. The emphasis of its representatives was on the fact that the churches and institutions which agreed with the statement were divisive, exclusive and coercive, while the denomination that had broken with one of the major tenants of the Christian faith and ethics was seeking to maintain the bond of communion. But in actual fact the local resolution is a response to the decision of the synod of the denomination in 2015. Its aim is to clarify the understanding of a vital ethical issue in the light of Scripture and it had no intention whatsoever to coerce anyone, let alone a local church, to adopt its views.

Such a reversal in the appreciation of events is not unusual and most significant and revealing! It raises important questions with regards to the status of the Bible, the plurality of interpretations and the bond of communion. Careful study of the Bible shows that its authority lies in the fact that it is an inspired, infallible communication of the divine truth. The Lord of the universe has not remained silent, but has revealed himself and his council in the categories of human language in such a way that we, human beings, can truly – though not exhaustively – understand what he is communicating in the Scriptures. When reading and interpreting the Bible, it is important to take into account its cultural and historical settings,

while holding fast to the objective content of the divine Word. The more we delve into God's revelation the more we find that it is pregnant with meaning and relevance.

The limit to the diversity and contradictory readings and interpretations of the Scriptures remains its plain sense, in other words its objective content and meaning. The historical-grammatical and literary approaches to the canonical books combined with the analogy of faith and the enlightenment by the Spirit remain a sure means to the proper understanding of the written Word. These methods allow for an unequivocal assertion of divine authority over the minds and lives of believers and the Church. The bond of communion thus implies a world view and a life vision which uphold a high view of truth, as stated in the classical formulation of Christian doctrine and ethics.

In contrast, plurality leads to the relativizing of truth, doctrine and ethics. Though personal convictions are welcome, genuine debates seldom takes place. But then, what do the bond of communion and the unity of the Church mean when one is con-

fronted with major contradictory doctrinal stands and ethical views that are more in conformity with the contemporary cultural consensus and fashions that reflect different world and life views? Such a notion of communion and unity can be compared to some form of fideism which implies a dichotomy between faith and reason and a divided field of knowledge. It is no wonder that such a standpoint is hardly compatible with Paul's statement on the unity and diversity of the body of Christ:

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in the manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call – one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. (Ephesians 4:1-7, ESV)

From the editor

1. As the new book review editor of our Journal we welcome Dr Hans Burger from Kampen, the Netherlands. Hans is Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at the Theologische Universiteit Kampen. His email address is jmburger@tukampen.nl and you can contact him with suggestions concerning books which could be reviewed in the Journal. At the same time we say a warm 'Thank you' to the outgoing review editor, Dr Joel White, who has worked hard for the Journal since 2014.
2. The next FEET conference will be held in Prague on 28-31 August 2020. Please note that this is a day shorter than previous conferences. The subject will be 'Discerning the Work of the Holy Spirit in and through the Church'.
3. This time our featured author is Dr Pavel Cerny. Please have a look at the featured author page via <http://www.paternoster-periodicals.co.uk/european-journal-of-theology>