

Indivisible

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I Corinthians 1:10-18

If you've been ordained in the Presbyterian Church as an elder, deacon or minister anytime since 1967, you were asked to make answer to this ordination question: "Do you promise to further the peace, unity and purity of the church?" I've posed that question to others numerous times, and I've responded "yes" to it six times – twice as an elder and four times as a minister.

Think about those words: peace, unity, purity. What do they mean, and what do they mean when joined together in an ordination question?

Some 16 years ago, when the Presbyterian Church was facing a significant crisis, the General Assembly established a task force, called the Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church, based, as you might guess, on that ordination question. Could the church hold together? Could it hold together as it experienced deep conflict on the authority of the Bible, on the meaning of Jesus Christ, and, especially, on our understanding of human sexuality?

It's a ridiculous question, a colleague said. How can you have purity – clarity of opinion or thought – and unity – difference of opinion on that very concept? And how could you do it peacefully and peaceably?

It was not simply a theoretical question. People were leaving the church, on one side or the other. Congregations were departing. They still are. People were choosing not to get ordained, or were prevented from being ordained.

I was privileged to serve on that Theological Task Force. We worked hard. We studied. We listened. We prayed. Our final proposal made space for various perspectives. For some, that compromise was helpful. For others, especially on matters of LGBTQ Presbyterians, any compromise at all – on either side, was

unacceptable. Some of us who were known to be ordination supporters were often asked how we could compromise. It was not easy then, and messy, as it remains, and never linear.

Can peace, unity and purity co-exist? It is not simply a theoretical question. And it is not a new one. Some 50 years after the ministry of Jesus, the apostle Paul wrote to one of the many churches popping up throughout the middle east, the church in Corinth. Paul had heard of conflict, of in-fighting. The church was not big in total, probably numbering in the hundreds. Still, the conflict was intense. It centered, as it so often does, around leadership. Power. Charisma. Rightful authority.

From a distance Paul wrote to them, playing his own authority card: "...I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you should be in agreement and that there should be no divisions among you, but that you should be united in the same mind and the same purpose." Paul continued: "...it has been reported...that there are quarrels among you...each of you says, 'I belong to Paul', or 'I belong to Apollos', or 'I belong to Cephas', or 'I belong to Christ.' Has Christ been divided?"

No room for factions in Paul's church. Christ is not divided. Only one object of allegiance.

We know such unity did not mean uniformity – in others places in the epistles Paul encouraged differences among dietary practices and the practice of circumcision. As long as differences did not create factions, they were acceptable, so far as, Paul will continually demand, Christ is at the center, Christ who is not divided.

Scott Hoezee writes that "Unity is found in Christ alone and in the work he accomplished on the cross."

Doug Hume writes that "The congregation at Corinth was rich in ethnic and social diversity. It was composed of the population of one of the Roman Empire's a major transportation node. Paul's call to have the 'same mind and purpose' is not

asking individuals to relinquish their distinctive identities and vocations. He does not seek to erase the diversity in the church of Corinth.”

Paul Bellen-Boyer writes that: Paul does not ask that the Corinthians be identical...They are to stop working against one another (through competitiveness, quarreling, and maintaining imperial divisions in their fellowship). Instead, they are to work together by emulating Christ’s radical upset of the world’s power relationships.”

Is Christ divided now? Denominations too numerous to count. Factions within denominations. Schism persists, and it has evolved over the centuries. Bryan Findlayson writes: “The fractured state of Christianity reflects human weakness; it reflects our limitations to transcend history and culture. We fail to deal with problems in the church and so end up in schism. We cling to our racial identity, preserving cultural churches. So, we live with massive division.”

Can peace, unity and purity co-exist? Why bother, we wonder, and are sometimes asked. We respond: so that our mission to a broken and fearful world can be strong, “so they will know we are Christians by our love.”

So we seek unity with those with whom we disagree, about Jesus, or the Bible, or human nature, even as we hold fast to our core principles. Paul Clendenin writes that even now, “Not all Christians distrust, demonize, fear, caricature and separate themselves from each other. We can also find voices of inclusion, embrace, toleration and even celebration.”

In the drafts of the Gettysburg Address, the phrase “under God” was not included. Lincoln included it in his final, spoken version. While never a member of any church, Lincoln attended Presbyterian congregations in Springfield and Washington. He had developed a relationship with Phineas Gurley, pastor of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington. Gurley wrote in his memoirs that “...in the latter days of his chastened and weary life, after the death of his son Willie and his visit to the battlefield at Gettysburg, (Lincoln) said to me with tears in this eyes, that he had lost confidence in everything but God...”

In 1954, Gurley's successor, George Docherty, preached a Lincoln Day sermon with President Dwight Eisenhower, a recently-baptized Presbyterian, in attendance. Something was missing in the Pledge of Allegiance, Docherty asserted, and soon thereafter Eisenhower advanced legislation to add the phrase "under God" to the pledge. (Some of you visited the New York Avenue Church in Washington even yesterday, and sat in Lincoln's pew! Visit www.nyapc.org to learn more of this story)

Think about those words, certainly more familiar to us than any ordination question. "...(o)ne nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." It may not be a very elegant transition from "peace, unity and purity" in the church to "under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all" in our nation. But the connection seems apt, and no less challenging, and no less important.

I am not sure if you know this, but there was an inauguration Friday. And there was a march yesterday, or rather a series of marches. Clearly the co-existence of the two represent deep division in our body politic. Deep division. Just as the fabric of the church is frayed, so is the fabric of our democracy.

Where each of you stands as a citizen is based on your own sense of call. Where each of us stands as people of faith, and all of us together, is perhaps one of the reasons why we are here.

We Presbyterians have unique takes on these things. We insist that God is God of all of life, so that participation in civic life is not just recommended, but essential to living out our baptisms. And we also insist that God alone is Lord of the conscience, so that while it would be inappropriate for me, or anyone, to suggest how to vote, it would also be inappropriate for me, or anyone, to tell you not to march, in whatever form it takes, to act on your conscience, as a matter of faith.

We seek to be, even imperfectly, prophetic, yet not partisan. But we have taken, and do take, stands, on matters of importance. Rarely have those stands reflected unanimity within the church. They have, at times, caused controversy, and even schism. Slavery was such an occasion. Our stance on the Vietnam War. We have

raised our voices or taken action based on conscience and calling, even when that has caused strain within the church that has mirrored fracture in the culture.

From the very beginning in the life of the church and the life of the nation, we have lived with tension and been asked to navigate it. Peace, unity and purity, for example, or liberty and justice for all.

The existence of that tension could easily lead us down two paths, paths we must avoid. Tension does not mean that we avoid engagement. To avoid is to abdicate our role both as citizens and people of faith. We cannot put our heads down and hide our eyes when the parade goes by. We stand up. We speak out.

But the other path we must avoid is the one that vilifies and demonizes the other. Perhaps we might even speak with, listen to, even understand, those who might vote or believe differently than we do. What a gift that would be.

Our prophetic activity, marching, writing letters, speaking out, is fueled by love. Radical love, that reflects God's radical love for us. How we educate and organize and agitate matters, including how we treat those with whom we disagree.

Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote that "the church is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and critic of the state, and never its tool." I believe that.

So we stand *for what* we believe – equality, justice.

And we stand *against* other things – racism, sexism, xenophobia, transphobia, classism, religious intolerance.

We stand, and march, for all those who can't. We seek common ground where it may be found, religiously and politically. We will pray for all our elected leaders, including a new president, even as we speak truth to power with humility, integrity and clarity.

That we do it is not the question. *How* we do it is the great opportunity, with courage, yes, but also with hope, and love.

And when things are difficult, or unclear, and allegiances are in conflict, we trust the Holy Spirit and we trust in the power of the community called church to help us in our navigation.

Paul Bellen-Boyer writes “In our daily lives, we constantly see real differences and divisions. All the current rhetoric about political divisions touches on the real fact that people have different opinions, beliefs, and interests. The markers of difference are part of our identity. And many of these are pretty important – we will not give them up or set them aside lightly.” Nor should we, I would add.

Our creeds, secular and religious – liberty and justice in tension or peace, unity and purity in some never-ending dance – call us to make choices as we live our lives. That we make them is crucial – that’s why so many of you marched yesterday. How we make them matters as well, as we give witness to the core values of our faith.

Peace, unity and purity are aspirational in the church, and national indivisibility feels, at best, like a distant dream. But we believe in a God of transformation, who can make a way when there is no way. That is our hope, and that is why we march, seeking, ever, the light of God. Amen.