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1989, p. 54,18-16, III, 1

## **GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR ECUMENICAL RELATIONS**

Report of the Committee on Interchurch Relations

1. That the proposed “Guiding Principles for Ecumenical Relations” be adopted as amended in consultation with the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. *Adopted*

### **GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR ECUMENICAL RELATIONS**

#### **PART ONE: THE BIBLICAL BASIS FOR ECCLESIASTICAL UNION**

In ecclesiastical union two denominations join in submitting to one common form of government. Since ecclesiastical jurisdiction includes the maintenance of spiritual discipline, unity in polity requires agreement in the standards of faith and worship which such discipline maintains. Hence unification in polity, when properly sought and achieved, involves also unity in faith, discipline, and worship.

As we take account of the diversity that exists between denominations arising from differences of ethnic identity, cultural background, and historical circumstance, the most conclusive evidence derived from Scripture is required to support the position that the obliteration of denominational separateness is an obligation resting upon these

Churches of Christ. The differences that exist often manifest the diversity which the church of Christ ought to exemplify and make for the enrichment of the church's total witness. If ecclesiastical union impairs this diversity, then it may be achieved at too great an expense and tends to an impoverishment inconsistent with the witness to Christ which the church must bear.

Though the diversity which manifests itself in differentiating historical development might appear to make ecclesiastical union inadvisable or even perilous in certain cases, yet the biblical evidence in support of union is so plain that any argument to the contrary, however plausible, must be false.

#### A. The Ethnic Universalism of the Gospel

In Christ there is now no longer Jew or Gentile, barbarian, Scythian, bond or free (Gal 3:28, Col 3:11). The New Testament does not suppose that the differences natural to individuals nor those arising from ethnic identity, cultural background, and historical circumstance are to be obliterated by the gospel. But it does mean that the unity of Christ transcends all diversity arising from language, race, culture, history. What is more, this unity embraces and utilizes all the diversity that is proper and this is created by God's providence. If we should maintain that the diversity is in any way incompatible with the unity of which the church is the expression, then we should be denying that unity which the ethnic universalism of the gospel implies. Implicit in the universalism of the gospel is the same kind of universalism in that which the gospel designs, the building up of Christ's church.

#### B. The Universalism of the Apostolic Church

The church of the apostolic days embraces all nations, and kindreds, and peoples and tongues. There is no evidence in the New Testament for the diversification of distinct denominations and anything tending to such diversification was condemned (I Cor 1:10-13). The emphasis falls upon the oneness of faith (Eph 4:5) and the oneness of the fellowship of the saints (Eph 4:2-4, 11-16; Phil 2:2-3,4:2).

#### C. Jesus' Prayer for Unity

It is a travesty of this text (Jn 17:20-21), as of all others bearing upon the unity of the church, to think of the unity for which Christ prayed apart from the unity in the bond of truth. Verse 21 must not be dissociated from verse 20. To divorce the unity for which Christ prayed from all that is involved in believing upon him through the apostolic witness is to sunder what Christ placed together. Furthermore, the pattern Jesus provides in this prayer — "as thou, Father, art in me and I in thee" — makes mockery of the application of the text when unity is divorced from the characterization which finds its analogy in trinitarian unity and harmony.

But while these and other distortions of this text are to be shunned, the prayer of Jesus does bear upon our question in two respects.

1. The fragmentation and consequent lack of fellowship, harmony, and cooperation which appear on the ecclesiastical scene are a patent contradiction of unity

## POSITION PAPERS

exemplified in that to which Jesus referred when he said, “as thou, Father, art in me and I in thee”.

2. The purpose stated in Jesus’ prayer — “that the world may believe that thou hath sent me” — implies a manifestation observable by the world. Jesus prays for a visible unity that will bear witness to the world. The mysterious unity of believers with one another must come to visible expression so as to be instrumental in bringing conviction to the world.

### D. The Unity of the Body of Christ

The church is the body of Christ and there is no schism in the body (I Cor 12:25). As in the human body, there is diversity in unity and unity in diversity (I Cor 12). The point to be stressed, however, is the unity. If there is unity, it follows that this unity must express itself in all the functions which belong to the church. Since government in the church is an institution of Christ (Rom 12:8; I Cor 12:28; I Tim 5:17; I Pet 5:1,2), this unity must be expressed in government. The necessary inference to be drawn is that the government should manifest the unity and be as embracing in respect of its functioning as the unity of which it is an expression. A concrete illustration of this principle is the decree of the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:28,29; 16:4).

### E. The Kingdom of Christ

1. Christ is the head of the church. So ultimately there is the most concentrated unity of government in the church of Christ. He alone is King. Any infringement upon this sovereignty belonging to Christ is a violation of what is basic and central in the government of the church. It follows that all government in the church must adhere to the pattern of a cone which has its apex in Christ.
2. Christ also instituted the apostolate with authority delegated from him (Matt 16:18-19; cf. Jn 20:21, 23; Eph 2:19-22). This apostolic authority is exercised now only through the inscripturated Word. But in the sphere of delegated authority, the apostolate is supreme and will continue to be so to the end of time. This is the way the Holy Spirit, as the vicar of Christ, abiding in and with the church, exercises his function in accordance with Christ’s promise. He seals the apostolic witness by his own testimony and illumines the people of God in the interpretation and application of the same.
3. Subordinately, however, in terms of Matthew 16:19, the hegemony of the apostolate is undeniable and it exemplifies the descending hierarchy which Christ has established.
4. There is also in the New Testament institution the delegated authority of the presbyterate, always subject to the apostolic institution, to the Holy Spirit who inspired the apostles (Jn 16:13; 20:22), and ultimately to Christ as King and Head of the Church, but nevertheless supreme in this sphere of government.
5. Since all office in the church of Christ can be filled only by the gifts of the Spirit, this structural subordination of the government of the church to the rule of Christ functions in living reality as a fellowship of the one Spirit. Everyone who has the Spirit of Christ is thereby called as a good steward of the manifold grace of God to minister his spiritual gifts to all the saints, so far as he is given

opportunity. In particular, those whose gifts are for rule in the church must exercise such gifts in the communion of Christ and his church.

When these principles of gradation and communion are appreciated, and when coordinated with other consideration already established, especially that of the unity of the body of Christ, we appear to be provided with a pattern that points to the necessity of making the presbyterate as inclusive as is consistent with loyalty to Christ and the faith of the gospel. In a word, we are pointed to the necessity of unity in government, a unity that is violated when churches of Christ adhering to the faith in its purity and integrity are not thus united.

## **PART TWO: APPLYING THE PRINCIPLES OF UNION IN CHRIST'S CHURCH**

As we acknowledge the Biblical basis for ecclesiastical union, we must seek to bring these Biblical principles to expression. The unity of the church must be confessed and manifested for what it is, an organic unity enriched with the diversity of the gifts of the Spirit. In obedience to Christ's Word we must seek ways of removing barriers to union, and of perfecting fellowship in the gospel.

### **I. BRINGING TO EXPRESSION THE SPIRITUAL UNITY OF THE CHURCH**

#### **A. Confessing the Unity of the Church**

In the *Westminster Confession of Faith* the universality of the church is affirmed. It is defined as the "catholic or universal Church which is invisible", and this universality is affirmed as the oneness of "the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof..." (*WCF* 25.1). In the next section, universality is also affirmed of the church *as visible*, "the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation" (*WCF* 25.2). To this universal visible church Christ has given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God which, by his presence and Spirit, are made effective for the gathering and perfecting of the saints (*WCF* 25.3).

The unity and universality of the Church flows from the revelation of the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Apostle Paul urges the church to walk worthily of the calling wherewith ye were called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; giving diligence to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as also ye were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, and through all, and in all (Eph 4:1-6).

The unity for which the Apostle pleads is found in the one God and Father, the one Lord Jesus Christ, and the one Spirit.

#### **1. Unity in one God and Father**

As the people of God, the church is one in his electing love (Eph 1:3-6), one in his efficacious calling (1 Cor 1:2,9; 2 Cor 1:21-22), one in calling him "Father" (1 Cor

8:6; Eph 3:15), one as his holy dwelling (Eph 2:21; 1 Cor 3:9, 16-17; 2 Cor 6:16), one as united by the Father to the Son (Jn 17:22-23). The covenants of promise (Eph 2:12) by which God binds himself to his people in the Old Testament are fulfilled in the New. In Jesus Christ the new people of God are Abraham's descendants and heirs of the promise. As Israel was sprinkled with the blood of the covenant in the assembly at Sinai, so the church, gathered from the nations, is sprinkled with the blood of Christ (1 Pet 1:2). In the new people of God divisions are overcome: not only between Israel and Judah, but between Jew and Gentile. The wall of partition is broken down. Those who were aliens and strangers, far from God and the covenants of promise, are now brought near and made citizens of God's commonwealth (Eph 2:14-22). The unity of the new Israel is not less than the old: the brotherhood gains in spiritual depth but does not lose in covenantal bond. The unity of Israel was secured in symbol by the one place of worship to which they were summoned. In the new covenant that unity continues to be secured by God's summons to us: we are to gather spiritually to the heavenly Jerusalem in worship, and assembly physically in each place to call upon the name of the Lord (1 Cor 1:1; Heb 10:25,12:22). We affirm our unity in worship as we leave our gift at the altar in order to be reconciled to our brother (Mt 5:23).

## **2. Unity in our Lord Jesus Christ**

The church has but one Lord and Saviour; it is one in him. Jesus came to gather the lost sheep of the house of Israel, and to bring other sheep, not of Israel's fold, that there may be one flock as there is one shepherd (Jn 10:16). Christ builds his assembly through his death and resurrection, and by the agency of the Holy Spirit, sent from his throne of glory. Those who are given him by the Father hear his voice and follow him: they bear his name, for there is salvation in no other (1 Cor 6:11); they acknowledge his rule in the government of his church (Mt 18:17; 1 Cor 14:38; Heb 13:17).

When division of a denominational sort threatened at Corinth, Paul did not commend the diversity of expression nor condone separation as a necessary evil. Rather, he condemned it as an unthinkable denial of unity in Christ. Christians are saved only by union with Christ. When Christ died, we died, because he represented us. Since he lives, we live, not only because he lives for us, but because he lives in us. By the mark of baptism we bear the name of Christ, and his alone. To those in Corinth who were denominating themselves by Paul's name, the apostle replies, "Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were you baptized into the name of Paul?" (1 Cor 1:13). Paul passionately affirms the outward unity that should mark those who are baptized into the name of the one and only Savior. Paul does recognize divisions that separate Christians from heretics, but not those that set apart true Christians from each other (1 Cor 11:18-19).

The Lord's Supper, no less than baptism, marks the outward unity of the church in Jesus Christ. We who are many are one body as we partake together of the one bread (1 Cor 10:17). Those who are members of Christ's body are members of one another; the shalom of Christ rules in their hearts, to which they were called in one body (Eph 4:25, 5:30; Col 3:15).

## **3. Unity in one Spirit**

The Holy Spirit joins us to Christ; all who are joined to Christ share in the life of the Spirit. There is one body and one Spirit (Eph 4:4). Those who share in the Spirit are therefore joined to one another. This is the unity that Paul pleads with us to

manifest (Eph 4:3). The Spirit establishes unity through gifts designated to enhance it. The diversity of the Spirit's gifts does cause Christians to differ, but to differ in a way that does not divide, but unites (1 Cor 12). The diversity is that of an organism. We need most the ministry of those whose gifts differ most from our own. They eye needs the hand, and the head the foot (1 Cor 12:21). Prominent among the gifts of the Spirit are those that are necessary for unity: lowliness, meekness, longsuffering, forbearance—and above all, love (Eph 4:2; Gal 5:22; 1 Cor 13).

Unity in the Spirit is maintained in the order and discipline of the church, an order carried out through the gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor 12:27-31; Eph 4:11-13). Using these gifts, we are to strive "*spoudazo*" to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph 4:3). To break our fellowship with fellow Christians is to deny the unity of the Spirit.

If we confess the New Testament teaching regarding the unity of the church, we are obligated to seek urgently its expression. We cannot plead the unity of the church as invisible to excuse our failure to seek the unity of the church visible.

## B. Keeping and Restoring the Unity of the Church

### 1. Understanding denominational division

The necessity of the outward and visible communion of the people of God is not problematical in the light of Scripture. The problem lies in the divisions and obstacles to that communion that have been caused by error, pride and other forms of sin. The divisive spirit that Paul once rebuked among the Corinthians has shattered the visible unity of Christ's church. Denominational divisions have multiplied. In denominational communions Christians exercise a fellowship toward each other in doctrine, worship and order that they do not exercise toward other Christians. The measure of fellowship that is recognized and enjoyed may obscure the loss of the fellowship that is denied and excluded. Efforts to deny the reality of division by establishing a new, undivided church have only repeated the mistake of the "Christ" party in Corinth. Neither is it possible to validate by historical succession a true church of Christ as the exclusive heir of that title. While division has exposed false teaching and set apart belief from unbelief, it has also occurred over issues that were not fundamental to the gospel, with the result that we recognize many denominations to be true churches of Christ, even though they may have participated at one time in a rift that should have been reconciled.

In our present situation we would not deny the legitimacy and preciousness of the communion that exists within denominational bonds, but neither can we forget the brokenness of our divided condition. No denomination can rightly claim to be the exclusive manifestation of the church on earth, not act as though it were. Any church must recognize that its own endowments, resources, and situation are necessarily partial and limited and that Christ's gifts are present in other denominations. As the Westminster Confession states, Christ has given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God to the universal church visible. These gifts cannot be claimed as the exclusive property of one denomination. They are to be received in stewardship, to be used in an orderly fashion for all as opportunity arises. Speaking of the communion of the saints in worship, nurture, and benevolence, the Confession declares: "Which communion, as God offereth opportunity, is to be extended unto all those who, in every place, call upon the name of the Lord Jesus" (*WCF* 26.2).

The analogy of marriage is sometimes used in discussing the uniting of divided denominations. It assumes far too much as to their independence and self-sufficiency. At the least, the analogy should be of reconciling marital partners who have been separated or divorced. Seeking to manifest the unity of the Spirit might even be compared to removing a tourniquet from the body of Christ. There is, to be sure, a natural and proper distinction between the way the unity of the church is manifested on the congregational, regional, and universal level. Since the church is defined in the heavenly assembly where Christ is, it can be gathered on earth in larger or smaller assemblies. The New Testament speaks of house churches as well as city churches, and of the church in a region as well as the church universal (Col 4:15; 1 Cor 16:19; cf. Eph 1:1; Acts 8:1, 11:22; Rom 16:5; Philemon 2; cf. Rom 16:23; Acts 9:31, 15:3; 1 Cor 10:32, 12:28; cf. Rom 16:4, 16). Presbyterian order has recognized the flexibility of this manifestation of the church in its local, presbyterial, synodical, general, and ecumenical assemblies. Denominational divisions, however, cut across all these assemblies of Christians. Denominational divisions fail to take account of, or deny the principle of representation by which broader assemblies can deal with matters of common concern in wider areas.

## 2. **Ordering unity in diversity**

The oneness of the church wrought by the Spirit of Christ embraces diversity. The harmony of unity and diversity is expressed by Paul in the organic figure of the body. The figure is most apt and illuminating, for the life of the body depends upon the diverse functions of the individual members. The unity to be sought for the church is a spiritual unity; it is not merely organizational. Yet it is organic: The unity of the members is needed for the health of the whole. Paul does not advocate the perfecting of one organ apart from the body in order to prepare it for introduction into the body. It is in the body that the organ functions best, for in the body it both receives and gives according to the order appointed by the Creator. The Holy Spirit, the author of life, is also the Spirit who brought order to creation, moving on the face of the waters. Ardor and order are alike his gifts.

The order of the Spirit provides freedom. Unlike the kingdoms of this world, the kingdom of God offers liberty in the bonds of spiritual service. Those who are filled with the Spirit cannot ask whether others are qualified to deserve their ministry, nor can they doubt their own need of the ministry of those with “lesser” gifts. This principle must inform discussion and action toward the unity of divided denominations. It will quench denominational pride, and bring forward the yearning of love to receive the ministry of others, and to share whatever gifts Christ has graciously committed to our stewardship.

The order of the Spirit also maintains discipline. Discipline is a mark of the true church. The church as visible requires subjection to the Word by which Christ orders His church. Christ established His church upon the confessing Apostle Peter who acknowledged, as the spokesman of the twelve, the person and work of Jesus the Christ. The faith that was given to Peter by revelation from the Father is essential to the church. As apostolic, the church remains on the foundation of apostolic doctrine given by inspiration in Scripture. That very revelation, however, also grounded Christ’s word about the keys of the kingdom. As the church pronounces the Word of the Lord in the circumstances of its ministry it is proclaiming the opening and closing of the gates of the kingdom of heaven. The gospel opens the door to penitent sinners, but closes it

against the rebellious and unbelieving. While any church council may err in its interpretation or application of apostolic doctrine, there must be both the willingness to be governed by the Word of the Lord in the Bible, and a confession of apostolic doctrine for the church to fulfill its calling in the world. Apostasy in faith and life is destructive of the fellowship in Christ; only by rejecting such error can the church continue. From false apostles and antichrists the church must turn away; those who steadfastly hear the voice of false shepherds and follow them cannot be regarded as the sheep of Christ. There are organizations which falsely call themselves churches of God, and others which once were churches, but have become synagogues of Satan. Communion with such is spiritual adultery and an offense against Christ and his saints (OPC Form of Government, IV:3).

On the other hand, there are those communions that submit to the Scripture as the Word of God written, confess the apostolic doctrines of salvation by grace, and maintain through a sufficient discipline the Word and the sacraments in their fundamental integrity. All such communions *must* seek closer fellowship, recognizing Biblical truth as it is heard and embraced within each communion, and rejoicing in the mutual ministry of diverse spiritual gifts. *For* denominations that confess together Biblical truth as summarized in the Westminster Confession and practice presbyterian government the biblical obligation is to go beyond fraternal relations, conversations and cooperation, and to unite.

## II. DEVELOPING PROCEDURES FOR REMOVING BARRIERS TO UNITY

### A. Submission to the Head of the Church

No schedule of conversations, no procedures for reception or plans of union will be pleasing to the Lord or effective in his service unless his glory is the motivation of our actions. Even the admission of individuals to the fellowship of Christ's church involves a pledge to bear their burdens for the sake of the Lord. Any bringing together of divided Christians bears with it the problems as well as the joys of closer fellowship in Christ. Apart from the love and forbearance of the Spirit such burdens may seem oppressive. We do not seek our comfort and convenience, however, but the will of the Lord. By his grace we will find the deep joy of "unfeigned love of the brethren" (1 Pet 1:22).

The goal that motivates our efforts will also mold our procedures. We dare not approach our Christian brethren in an adversarial attitude, but with the love that seeks their good, and recognizes Christ's appointment that we serve one another. Problems will not be ignored, but love does not magnify them, but seeks the stronger ties of ministry in which they may be resolved as we are willing to wash the feet of our brethren (John 13). To seek assurance that the confession of a sister denomination is credible is surely legitimate, but we must be careful not to make perfection the requirement for credibility, always mindful of the plank which may well be present in our own eye.



## POSITION PAPERS

### B. Fellowship in the Work of the Lord

Granted that there are denominations whose profession and practice are such that serious obstacles to unity remain, what procedures should we follow in seeking closer fellowship? The very diversity embraced in the fellowship of the church means that full unanimity in doctrine and uniformity in practice is not possible. There are denominations that have required uniformity in doctrine, but have allowed great diversity in both worship and order. Others have prescribed worship and order but have allowed great diversity of doctrine. Still others have insisted on governmental control but have been less stringent in forms of doctrine and worship. Our central commitment is to the Biblical system of doctrine of our confession and to the agreement of Presbyterian government with Scripture. The Scriptural mandate we have recognized makes it urgent that we seek avenues of communication with denominations that share these commitments in our own continent and around the world.

Not all relationships looking toward restoring fuller fellowship need be conducted through official denominational channels. The disunity brought about by denominational division has been a primary factor in the organization of many parachurch bodies for mission, nurture, and fellowship. Such organizations are irregular they become involved in the work of the *organized* church, *but* they are not illegitimate, when they seek to perform that which is a proper function of Christians in their general office. The wisdom of association with any particular parachurch or interdenominational association is always subject to question and review, but the possibility of such association is not ruled out by our effort to maintain a Biblical church order. Rather, the sad results of so many divisions in Christ's church make such contacts desirable.

### **PART THREE: SUMMARY OF BIBLICAL GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR CHURCH COOPERATION AND UNION**

In the light of the Biblical basis and the principles of application presented, the Committee would propose the following guidelines for church cooperation and union:

1. Denominational division creates barriers to fellowship that damage the life and witness of Christ's church and separate what the Spirit of Christ joins together.
2. Denominational communions are obligated by Scripture to seek the removal of barriers and the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.
3. The unity of the church must be grounded in the truth of the apostolic gospel as it is given in the Scripture; it must respect the order Christ has appointed for His church.
4. Denominations that confess the Biblical doctrines of salvation summarized in the Westminster Standards and other Reformed confessions must recognize the urgency of the Scriptural mandate for union.
5. In developing steps toward union, no denomination may regard itself as an autonomous communion, independently constituted according to its own preferences. It exists only as the church of Christ, subject to his headship and laws and must humbly recognize its brokenness and the Lord's command.

6. Since the church of Christ is manifested in smaller and larger assemblies, the unity of the church is to be sought at the level of the local church and in regional, national, and ecumenical assemblies.
7. In the divided condition of the church many organizations for consultation and cooperation have emerged. Some represent the general office of believers within the structure of church government. The wisdom of association with any particular parachurch or interdenominational association is always subject to question and review, but such association may prove fruitful in the quest for manifesting the fellowship of the body of Christ.
8. Love for Christ, for the truth of Scripture, and for our fellow Christians must motivate our efforts to manifest the unity of the Spirit. No less do we seek by our unity to bear witness to the world so that others may believe that Jesus is the Christ, sent of the Father. We seek the ties of unity not for our own aggrandizement, but in order that we may bear one another's burdens. To remove walls of partition is to welcome others in Christ with their problems as well as their joys. Such fellowship requires the Spiritual gifts of meekness, forbearance, longsuffering — the graces the Spirit grants to this end.
9. The loving welcome of others in Christ's name requires our seeking assurance that their confession of faith is creditable, a judgment to be made in love. It does not justify our withholding fellowship from those who confess a like precious faith until we can be assured that their progress in the gospel has reached the level that we conceive our own to be. Fellowship in Christ welcomes weaker brethren. Problems that we discern in a communion that shares our confession of faith are problems that the Lord calls us to work out in the bonds of order that he has appointed.
10. Jesus Christ has charged his church to make disciples of all the nations; the Word of God has borne fruit in all the earth. We seek therefore closer fellowship with Christ's people in other lands. We do so not simply because we affirm the catholicity of the true church of Christ, but also because we know the dangers of a nationalistic narrowing of the gospel. We welcome ecumenical relations that will enable us to share with other communions the vision of the world-wide mission of the church. Such fellowship is made the more urgent by our common spiritual warfare against the false gospels spread globally by the principalities and powers of darkness.