

The Circle
Saint Mark PC
August 9, 2020

Just 4 years ago, the General Assembly of the PC(USA) adopted a new confession of faith, called the Confession of Belhar. It is not a new statement rather it was from the 1980's and that period of struggle with apartheid in South Africa. It is written as an interpretation of what Scripture leads us to believe and to do when faced with injustice, especially in light of the added problem at that time that the Reformed Church in South Africa was actively supporting apartheid.

So it is a statement of belief from that particular context and the PC(USA) adopted this statement because we said, "the clarity of Belhar's witness to unity reconciliation and justice might help the PC(USA) speak and act with similar clarity at a time when it faces division, racism and injustice."

Now in 2020, these words seem prophetic as we are shaken to our core, protests over injustice still going strong months after George Floyd. There is a need now more than ever perhaps for unity, reconciliation and justice. Can the church of Jesus Christ be a witness to these things during this time?

Here is just a couple of lines from the Belhar confession: "We believe that God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ; and that the church is called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, that the church is called blessed because it is a peacemaker." (CONFESSION OF BELHAR, PC(USA) BOOK OF CONFESSIONS)

That kind of challenge laid at our feet leads me to think about what Scripture has to say about unity,

reconciliation, diversity and ultimately justice. Those are big questions.

To that end, I had mentioned to our Bible Study group last week briefly in passing a book by Stephen Patterson which is called "The Forgotten Creed."ⁱ A very recent book written almost entirely on these 3 verses in Galatians.

It turns out that Galatians 3:26-28 is in his words the forgotten creed. Why? Because some recent scholarship has re-affirmed that Paul wrote these words by quoting the very first Baptismal creed said by followers of Jesus in the days before the letters of Paul or the gospels were even written. These verses are, we believe, at the heart of Paul's social vision.ⁱⁱ There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, for all are one in Christ Jesus.

Patterson says this simple but ancient baptismal creed means, "Ethnicity, class and gender count neither for you or against you. We are all children of God..."ⁱⁱⁱ

It also means, shocking as it might be, that perhaps the very earliest Christian creed is about race, class and gender. Not that this vision has been realized over the years of course.

The problem of unity and division among different groups or cultures, or even different ideas is an age-old problem. When the 500th anniversary of the Reformation was celebrated in 2017, we were able to make a trip to Germany to learn more about Martin Luther during that time. The one thing which stood out to me was that Luther was filled with sorrow and regret that his theology and writings caused division and a lack of unity. After his death, Christendom divided

severely, and resulted in a 30-year's war decades later. He saw that as a tragedy.

Unity among diversity was a problem confronted by the Apostle Paul. A problem faced by the early church fathers and through the ages.

Stephen Patterson writes further: "...race, class and gender typically are used to divide the human race into us and them to the advantage of us." ^{iv} How timely those words sound in 2020. (Galatians aimed to declare that there is no us or them. We are all children of God")

This was in the mind of a man named Allan. He tells of travelling to South Africa on business in 1978, during the height of apartheid. Black and white were separated by law. He was advising American companies on how to work in that environment. So Allan decided he would go to church on Sunday in a black neighborhood. Allan was white. Problem is that was technically illegal at the time. Nonetheless, Allan tells of finding a church on Sunday, walking in early with another associate, and sitting in a pew near the front.

He had read the scriptures in Galatians 3 and knew that these barriers should be brought down. But he wasn't sure what would happen.

Other members of the church began to file in - he noticed that they sat far away from him. The sanctuary became quite full except for a large empty circle around him. He understood - who knew if he was there to do good or harm? But the service started, and early on the song Amazing Grace was sung. Allan and his friend joined in heartily with the singing and at the close of the song, an older woman came from the back and sat in his pew, and just said one word to him; "Jesus". Allan did something also illegal from that

time - he reached out to embrace the woman and she responded with a hug.

The circle of emptiness collapsed around them, as people scooted over to sit with Allan and his friend from every side.

He remembers it as a life altering experience. There was indeed one church and one baptism. The circle of fear was at least for this day no more. And it was in Christ that this happened.

Two things I would like to affirm today as I believe God asks us to do a new thing to inspire people who wish to be courageous enough to confront this widening division in our country and speak unity, reconciliation and justice to the world.

FIRST - In Christ Unity precedes diversity.

Galatians 3 says that "there is no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

As this is perhaps the very first Christian Creed if we accept this analysis of Paul, we also confirm in the church that it is our one-ness which comes first; before we are our diverse selves, from so many backgrounds with so many interests and talents, we are one in Christ. We are first of all brothers and sisters in Christ.

I am coming to believe that if this creed came first, our unity comes first as well. If it is how believers were baptized in the first century, our unity comes first.

This oneness reflects our true humanity - to be one in Christ is to confess that we share common needs with all people. Shelter and food, the need to love and be

loved, the need to forgive and be forgiven. For respect and human dignity.

It is not a cheap unity, for it makes us recognize and rejoice in our differences in a way that may re-orient our thinking, even cause us to reach out to our enemies.

In Christ unity preceeds diversity.

SECOND - Unity in Christ presumes diversity. When we are one in Christ, we recognize the vast differences of people - even down to the individual - each is unique in a way no other is, like the fingerprint cannot be duplicated, so each person is a separate treasure - a child of God.

We recognize that we are all different in some respects, as we are all the same in some respects. It makes categorizing people into groups problematic, based on race, income, gender, orientation, so many other ways. In the worst case it is a way to divide us and pit us against each other.

Unity presumes a rich diversity.

Trying to quash diversity has been a human trait over the centuries. It often ended badly. Maybe you recall the Cultural Revolution in China in the 1960s where people were instructed to dress alike, drab colors, art and beauty were dismissed as unnecessary. Flower shops closed, gardens were plowed under.

What actually happened was that diversity and expression went underground. Women cultivated flowers indoors, and people wore bright clothes under their drab uniforms. Children hid jars of goldfish under their beds. Beauty and diversity existed as a kind of risky secret, finally until government policy relaxed.

But the lesson is that unity doesn't not presume a drab kind of oneness. Unity presumes a rich diversity.

The final line of this baptismal Creed from Galatians says you are all one. That doesn't mean you are all the same.

Rather, I like to think of it in a way like one of the Apollo Astronauts (Russell Schweikert) remarked about being in orbit around the Earth.

"You go around it (the earth) in an hour and a half. You begin to recognize your identity is with the whole thing. You cross borders again and again and you don't even see them. From where you see it, the thing is a whole and is so beautiful, you wish you could take a person in the hand and say - "look at that"!

Unity, Reconciliation and justice is our message to a broken world. It is Paul's social vision.

Paul says, "You are all one in Christ Jesus"

May it be so. Amen.

ⁱⁱ PATTERSON, STEPHEN, THE FORGOTTEN CREED, OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, NEY YORK, 2018.

ⁱⁱ PATTERSON, P. 1

ⁱⁱⁱ PATTERSON, P. 5

^{iv} PATTERSON, P. 6