



The Guiding Principles of the Presbytery of Donegal in Matters of Discernment and Dismissal

Preparing for Discussion, Dialogue and Discernment

converse (v.)

"to communicate (with)," 1590s; earlier "to move about, live, dwell" (mid-14c.), from Old French converser "to talk" (12c.), from Latin conversari (see [conversation](#)).

Related: Converted; conversing.

conversation (n.)

mid-14c., "living together, having dealings with others," also "manner of conducting oneself in the world;" from Old French conversation, from Latin conversationem (nom. conversatio) "act of living with," noun of action from pp. stem of conversari "to live with, keep company with," literally "turn about with," from Latin com- "with" (see [com-](#)) + vertare, frequentative of vertere (see [versus](#)).

Of the Church

The catholic or universal church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fullness of Him that filleth all in all.

The visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel (not confined to one nation as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, together with their children; and is the Kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ; the house and family of God, through which men are ordinarily saved and union with which is essential to their best growth and service.

Unto this catholic visible Church, Christ hath given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life, to the end of the world: and doth by his own presence and Spirit, according to his promise, make them effectual thereunto.

Westminster Confession, 6.140-6.0142

*God has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love mercy,
and to walk humbly with your God?*

Micah 6:8

We are the church. And we are part of the church. We are bound together. And we are bound to God. Under Christ our head, we work together to honor the gospel. This means we are in covenant with one another – trusting God, trusting one another, and working together to discern what God wills for us now and in the future.

In Donegal Presbytery, we will work for justice for our body and for our congregations, show mercy and compassion on one another, walking humbly before God and one another. And we will do this especially when we are walking with one another, discerning whether or not we will remain the church together or whether we will continue to bless and pray for one another as part of the church universal even if we are not part of the same denomination.

Working for justice for all involved, showing mercy and compassion for one another, and walking humbly with one another before God – this is our definition of grace. As we do this, we show grace to one another. And we believe that we will receive grace from God for this time. It is certainly not less than this. And it will certainly take all that we have to be present to it.

Because we are the church, and because we are covenanted together, and because of God's grace, these are our values...

VALUES

Listening

We value listening. We believe that we must be able to repeat back to one another what that person has said – to that person's satisfaction that he/she has been heard. We believe that presbytery representatives must listen in this way to congregations and Session. We believe that Session and congregations must listen like this to presbytery representatives.

Forbearance

We believe that God's sovereign care of the church and the world means that we "forbear." We are brothers and sisters in Christ. God is in charge. We will believe the best about one another. And we will look for what God is doing.

Respect

We will respect one another. Believing of each other that the other person is part of God's church – we will seek to hear what God is saying to and through that person.

Humility

Recognizing our finitude and God's ongoing work in each of us, we will show humility and entertain the idea that we might be wrong.

(The above four are part of an address delivered by James Calvin Davis to the Presbytery of Donegal on March 16, 2013. It is reprinted here with his permission.)

Not impeding ministry

We value the ministry of our congregations. And we value the ministry of the presbytery. Part of our listening to one another will be conversation about how ministries move forward.

Valuing our historic covenants – and valuing that people sometimes are called to walk away from these covenants

We value the historic covenants of our congregations. We value the covenants that these congregations have had with Donegal Presbytery and its antecedents. Many of our congregations have centuries of history. We also value that sometimes God calls people to walk away from covenants and make new ones. Our listening will seek to uphold these values, even when they are in tension to one another.

Addressing Grievance and Seeking Reconciliation

We value admitting directly to each other when we are bearing grievance, being transparent in conflict, and together seeking the reconciling grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our discipleship calls us to have direct conversations with each other when there is offense or concern, rather than letting the “root of bitterness” fester and grow. We value seeking the help of third party guides when this would help to resolve conflict and disaffection. We value the necessity in our life together of confession of our share of responsibility in sin and disaffection, of repentance, and of making amends when offense has been given or received.

Witness before the world

We value our witness before the world. The way that we treat one another, the way that we speak of one another, and the way that we speak to the world. This involves, but is not limited to, a commitment not to seek litigation and civil court action, if possible.

Not bearing false witness before the world or against one another

The seventh commandment calls to tell the truth. The ninth commandment calls us not to bear false witness against our neighbor. Therefore, we will seek to be truthful about what we say about ourselves, about others, about the denomination – being especially mindful to be truthful about what others believe and say in matters of faith. We will hold ourselves to questions 143, 144, and 145 of the Westminster Confession as our core principles for how we speak of one another.

True grace is costly on all sides – financially and relationally

We believe that true grace costs. God’s grace is costly to God. And showing grace to one another will be costly to us. It cost time. It costs effort. It costs relationally. It cost financially. It costs love. We covenant to be willing to pay this price.

These are difficult conversations. And we value not turning away from this difficult and important work.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

To do this, we will commit, and ask congregations/Sessions to commit to the following spiritual practices during these conversations.

Prayer Covenant – We will commit to spending each consecutive day in prayer for one another during the season of discernment – Session members praying for one another and for the presbytery. And representatives of the presbytery praying for one another and for each Session member by name. We will pray that each person be given the insight, wisdom, strength, and grace to hear God’s direction clearly in this process.

Dwelling in the Word Together -- We will spend time in God’s Word, sharing our lives, seeking God’s direction, and praying for one another. We will study and dwell together in central texts for disciples who are bearing with one another in times of difficulty. Some of our core texts are drawn from: Micah 6, Matthew 18, Mark 8, John 20, John 17, John 20, John 21, Philippians 2, Ephesians 2, and Hebrews 12.

FOR REFLECTION FROM THE WESTMINSTER CONFESSION: OUR COVENANT NOT TO BEAR FALSE WITNESS AGAINST EACH OTHER

Question 143: Which is the ninth commandment?

Answer: The ninth commandment is, Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.

Question 144: What are the duties required in the ninth commandment?

Answer: The duties required in the ninth commandment are, the preserving and promoting of truth between man and man, and the good name of our neighbor, as well as our own; appearing and standing for the truth; and from the heart, sincerely, freely, clearly, and fully, speaking the truth, and only the truth, in matters of judgment and justice, and in all other things: Whatsoever; a charitable esteem of our neighbors; loving, desiring, and rejoicing in their good name; sorrowing for, and covering of their infirmities; freely acknowledging of their gifts and graces, defending their innocency; a ready receiving of a good report, and unwillingness to admit of an evil report, concerning them; discouraging talebearers, flatterers, and slanderers; love and care of our own good name, and defending it when need requires; keeping of lawful promises; studying and practicing of: Whatsoever things are true, honest, lovely, and of good report.

Question 145: What are the sins forbidden in the ninth commandment?

Answer: The sins forbidden in the ninth commandment are, all prejudicing the truth, and the good name of our neighbors, as well as our own, especially in public judicature; giving false evidence, suborning false witnesses, wittingly appearing and pleading for an evil cause, outfacing and overbearing the truth; passing unjust sentence, calling evil good, and good evil; rewarding the wicked according to the work of the righteous, and the righteous according to the work of the wicked; forgery, concealing the truth, undue silence in a just cause, and holding our peace when iniquity calls for either a reproof from ourselves, or complaint to others; speaking the truth unseasonably, or maliciously to a wrong end, or perverting it to a wrong meaning, or in doubtful and equivocal expressions, to the prejudice of truth or justice; speaking untruth, lying, slandering, backbiting, detracting, tale bearing, whispering, scoffing, reviling, rash, harsh, and partial censuring; misconstruing intentions, words, and actions; flattering, vainglorious boasting, thinking or speaking too highly or too meanly of ourselves or others; denying the gifts and graces of God; aggravating smaller faults; hiding, excusing, or extenuating of sins, when called to a free confession; unnecessary discovering of infirmities; raising false rumors, receiving and countenancing evil reports, and stopping our ears against just defense; evil suspicion; envying or grieving at the deserved credit of any, endeavoring or desiring to impair it, rejoicing in their disgrace and infamy; scornful contempt, fond admiration; breach of lawful promises; neglecting such things as are of good report, and practicing, or not avoiding ourselves, or not hindering: What we can in others, such things as procure an ill name.

FOR REFLECTION: OUR COVENANT TO PRAY FOR ONE ANOTHER

We promise to pray daily this prayer for one another:

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to one who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

Ephesians 3: 14 - 21



Baptism of the Christ, Daniel Bonnell

FOR REFLECTION: THE STANDARDS FOR ORDINATION IN THE PC(USA)

G-2.0104 Gifts and Qualifications

a. To those called to exercise special functions in the church—deacons, ruling elders, and teaching elders—God gives suitable gifts for their various duties. In addition to possessing the necessary gifts and abilities, those who undertake particular ministries should be persons of strong faith, dedicated discipleship, and love of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Their manner of life should be a demonstration of the Christian gospel in the church and in the world. They must have the approval of God’s people and the concurring judgment of a council of the church.

b. Standards for ordained service reflect the church’s desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life (F-1.02). The council responsible for ordination and/or installation (G.2.0402; G-2.0607; G-3.0306) shall examine each candidate’s calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability for the responsibilities of ordered ministry. The examination shall include, but not be limited to, a determination of the candidate’s ability and commitment to fulfill all requirements as expressed in the constitutional questions for ordination and installation (W-4.4003). Councils shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates.

W-4.4003 Constitutional Questions for Ordination, Installation, and Commissioning

The moderator of the **council** of those to be ordained, installed, or commissioned shall ask them to stand before the body of membership and to answer the following questions:

- a. Do you trust in Jesus Christ your Savior, acknowledge him Lord of all and Head of the Church, and through him believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?
- b. Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God’s Word to you?
- c. Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will you be instructed and led by those confessions as you lead the people of God?
- d. Will you fulfill your ministry in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture, and be continually guided by our confessions?
- e. Will you be governed by our church’s polity, and will you abide by its discipline? Will you be a friend among your colleagues in ministry, working with them, subject to the ordering of God’s Word and Spirit?
- f. Will you in your own life seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love your neighbors, and work for the reconciliation of the world?

g. Do you promise to further the peace, unity, and purity of the church?

h. Will you pray for and seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?

i. (1) (For ruling elder) Will you be a faithful ruling elder, watching over the people, providing for their worship, nurture, and service? Will you share in government and discipline, serving in councils of the church, and in your ministry will you try to show the love and justice of Jesus Christ?

(2) (For deacon) Will you be a faithful deacon, teaching charity, urging concern, and directing the people's help to the friendless and those in need, and in your ministry will you try to show the love and justice of Jesus Christ?

(3) (For teaching elder) Will you be a faithful teaching elder, proclaiming the good news in Word and Sacrament, teaching faith and caring for people? Will you be active in government and discipline, serving in the councils of the church; and in your ministry will you try to show the love and justice of Jesus Christ?

(4) (For ruling elder commissioned to particular pastoral service) Will you be a faithful ruling elder in this commission, serving the people by proclaiming the good news, teaching faith and caring for the people, and in your ministry will you try to show the love and justice of Jesus Christ?

(5) (For certified Christian educator) Will you be a faithful certified Christian educator, teaching faith and caring for people, and will you in your ministry try to show the love and justice of Jesus Christ?

F-1.0302 The Marks of the Church

With all Christians of the Church catholic, we affirm that the Church is "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic."

a. The Unity of the Church

Unity is God's gift to the Church in Jesus Christ. Just as God is one God and Jesus Christ is our one Savior, so the Church is one because it belongs to its one Lord, Jesus Christ. The Church seeks to include all people and is never content to enjoy the benefits of Christian community for itself alone. There is one Church, for there is one Spirit, one hope, "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:5–6).

Because in Christ the Church is one, it strives to be one. To be one with Christ is to be joined with all those whom Christ calls into relationship with him. To be thus joined with one another is to become priests for one another, praying for the world and for one another and sharing the various gifts God has given to each Christian for the benefit of the whole community. Division into different denominations obscures but does not destroy unity in Christ. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), affirming its historical continuity with the whole Church of Jesus Christ, is committed to the reduction of that obscurity, and is willing to seek and to deepen communion with all other churches within the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.

b. The Holiness of the Church

Holiness is God's gift to the Church in Jesus Christ. Through the love of Christ, by the power of the Spirit, God takes away the sin of the world. The holiness of the Church comes from Christ who sets it apart to bear witness to his love, and not from the purity of its doctrine or the righteousness of its actions.

Because in Christ the Church is holy, the Church, its members, and those in its ordered ministries strive to lead lives worthy of the Gospel we proclaim. In gratitude for Christ's work of redemption, we rely upon the work of God's Spirit through Scripture and the means of grace (W-5.5001) to form every believer and every community for this holy living. We confess the persistence of sin in our corporate and individual lives. At the same time, we also confess that we are forgiven by Christ and called again and yet again to strive for the purity, righteousness, and truth revealed to us in Jesus Christ and promised to all people in God's new creation.

c. The Catholicity of the Church

Catholicity is God's gift to the Church in Jesus Christ. In the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, by the power of the Spirit, God overcomes our alienation and repairs our division.

Because in Christ the Church is catholic, it strives everywhere to testify to Christ's embrace of men, women, and children of all times, places, races, nations, ages, conditions, and stations in life. The catholicity of the Church summons the Church to a deeper faith, a larger hope, and a more complete love as it bears witness to God's grace.

d. The Apostolicity of the Church

Apostolicity is God's gift to the Church in Jesus Christ. In Christ, by the power of the Spirit, God sends the Church into the world to share the gospel of God's redemption of all things and people.

Because in Christ the Church is apostolic, it strives to proclaim this gospel faithfully. The Church receives the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ through the testimony of those whom Christ sent, both those whom we call apostles and those whom Christ has called throughout the long history of the Church. The Church has been and is even now sent into the world by Jesus Christ to bear that testimony to others. The Church bears witness in word and work that in Christ the new creation has begun, and that God who creates life also frees those in bondage, forgives sin, reconciles brokenness, makes all things new, and is still at work in the world. To be members of the body of Christ is to be sent out to pursue the mission of God and to participate in God's new creation, God's kingdom drawing the present into itself. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) affirms the Gospel of Jesus Christ as received from the prophets and apostles, and stands in continuity with God's mission through the ages.

The Church strives to be faithful to the good news it has received and accountable to the standards of the confessions. The Church seeks to present the claims of Jesus Christ, leading persons to repentance, acceptance of Christ alone as Savior and Lord, and new life as his disciples. The Church is sent to be Christ's faithful evangelist: making disciples of all nations in the name of

the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; sharing with others a deep life of worship, prayer, fellowship, and service; and participating in God's mission to care for the needs of the sick, poor, and lonely; to free people from sin, suffering, and oppression; and to establish Christ's just, loving, and peaceable rule in the world.

The Authority of Scripture in the Confessions of the PC(USA)

F-1.0303 The Notes of the Reformed Church

Where Christ is, there is the true Church. Since the earliest days of the Reformation, Reformed Christians have marked the presence of the true Church wherever: the Word of God is truly preached and heard, the Sacraments are rightly administered, and ecclesiastical discipline is uprightly ministered. Inviting all people to participate in that new creation;

In our own time, we affirm that, in the power of the Spirit, the Church is faithful to the mission of Christ as it:

Proclaims and hears the Word of God,

responding to the promise of God's new creation in Christ, and
inviting all people to participate in that new creation;

Administers and receives the Sacraments,

welcoming those who are being engrafted into Christ,
bearing witness to Christ's saving death and resurrection,
anticipating the heavenly banquet that is to come, and
committing itself in the present to solidarity with the marginalized and the hungry; and

Nurtures a covenant community of disciples of Christ,

living in the strength of God's promise and
giving itself in service to God's mission.

F-2.04 THE CONFESSIONS AS STATEMENTS OF THE FAITH OF THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION

In its confessions, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) upholds the affirmations of the Protestant Reformation. The focus of these affirmations is God's grace in Jesus Christ as revealed in the Scriptures. The Protestant watchwords—grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone—embody principles of understanding that continue to guide and motivate the people of God in the life of faith.

SCOTS CONFESSIO CHAPTER XIX: THE AUTHORITY OF THE SCRIPTURES

As we believe and confess the Scriptures of God sufficient to instruct and make perfect the man of God, so do we affirm and avow their authority to be from God, and not to depend on men or angels. We affirm, therefore, that those who say the Scriptures have no other authority save that which they have received from the Kirk are blasphemous against God and injurious to the true Kirk, which always hears and obeys the voice of her own Spouse and Pastor, but takes not upon her to be mistress over the same.

WESTMINSTER: OF THE HOLY SCRIPTURE

1. Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence, do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men inexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation; therefore it pleased

the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his Church; and afterwards for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the Church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing; which maketh the Holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now ceased.

2. Under the name of Holy Scripture, or the Word of God written, are now contained all the books of the Old and New Testaments,.....All which are given by inspiration of God, to be the rule of faith and life.

4. The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man or church, but wholly upon God (who is truth itself), the author thereof; and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God.

5. We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the Church to an high and reverent esteem for the Holy Scripture; and the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God; yet, notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.

6. The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.¹¹ Nevertheless we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word; and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.

7. All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed, for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.

8. The Old Testament in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old), and the New Testament in Greek (which at the time of the writing of it was most generally known to the nations), being immediately inspired by God,¹⁶ and by his singular care and providence kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentic; so as in all controversies of religion the Church is finally to appeal unto them. But because these original tongues are not known to all the people of God who have right unto, and interest in, the Scriptures, and are commanded, in the fear of

God, to read and search them,¹⁸ therefore they are to be translated into the language of every people unto which they come, that the Word of God dwelling plentifully in all, they may worship him in an acceptable manner, and, through patience and comfort of the Scriptures, may have hope.

9. The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture, is the Scripture itself; and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it may be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.

10. The Supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures. (Westminster Confession, 6.010.)

CONFESSION OF 1967: THE BIBLE

The one sufficient revelation of God is Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate, to whom the Holy Spirit bears unique and authoritative witness through the Holy Scriptures, which are received and obeyed as the word of God written. The Scriptures are not a witness among others, but the witness without parallel. The church has received the books of the Old and New Testaments as prophetic and apostolic testimony in which it hears the word of God and by which its faith and obedience are nourished and regulated. The New Testament is the recorded testimony of apostles to the coming of the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, and the sending of the Holy Spirit to the Church. The Old Testament bears witness to God's faithfulness in his covenant with Israel and points the way to the fulfillment of his purpose in Christ. The Old Testament is indispensable to understanding the New, and is not itself fully understood without the New.

The Bible is to be interpreted in the light of its witness to God's work of reconciliation in Christ. The Scriptures, given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are nevertheless the words of men, conditioned by the language, thought forms, and literary fashions of the places and times at which they were written. They reflect views of life, history, and the cosmos which were then current. The church, therefore, has an obligation to approach the Scriptures with literary and historical understanding. As God has spoken his word in diverse cultural situations, the church is confident that he will continue to speak through the Scriptures in a changing world and in every form of human culture.

God's word is spoken to his church today where the Scriptures are faithfully preached and attentively read in dependence on the illumination of the Holy Spirit and with readiness to receive their truth and direction.

PRESBYTERIAN UNDERSTANDING AND USE OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

The Priority of the Plain Sense of the Text

Various ways of reading and construing Scripture (allegory, second or deeper or spiritual meanings, free association) have been and may be useful in the many roles that Scripture has in the church. However, when establishing what the text says for the purpose of doctrinal and ethical deliberations, the objective is to identify the plain sense of what is said in the text.

The Purpose of Holy Scripture

Scripture provides the knowledge of what is necessary for the glory of God and for human faith, life, and salvation. The subject of the Bible as Holy Scripture is God and God's way with humanity and the world. Holy Scripture is nonnative with respect to its theological subject. The purpose of Scripture has to do with questions about the ultimate origin, meaning, and goal of human life in relation to God, all of which lie behind or beyond the scope of secular scientific and historical disciplines. This guideline means that

Scripture is rightly used with respect to this subject matter.

Conversely, this guideline means that Scripture is not authoritative for any and everything, in any and every question. It is not an encyclopedia of information about every area of human knowledge and understanding.

So, for instance, it is not appropriate to go to the biblical sources for scientific understanding of such things as biology, astronomy, the structure of the universe, or historical knowledge in general.

This formulation of the purpose of Scripture emphasized its concern both with God and the way of God's people in the world. It asserts that the Scripture is misused whenever Christian faith and life are separated, either by emphasizing correct theology to the neglect of obedient Christian life, or by emphasizing the demands of the Christian life to the neglect of its theological presuppositions and goals. Put another way, Scripture is not properly used unless we remember the chief end of human life is to glorify God and seek first God's kingdom of righteousness in the world.

The Precedence of Holy Scripture

In matters of faith, life, and salvation, Scripture takes precedence over all other authorities. However, the precedence of Scripture does not call for the disregard of other authorities. There are other sources from which we can learn something of the matters with which Scripture deals uniquely. Examples of such sources that deserve our respect include church councils, laws and decrees; ancient and modern theologians and thinkers in general; and various forms of knowledge and experience. Since the wisdom of all such additional authorities is subordinate to and subject to correction by Scripture, the guideline of Scripture's precedence is best formulated in terms of three subsidiary guidelines.

The Priority of Holy Scripture

The witness of Scripture on matters within its purpose is authoritative over all other knowledge, opinions, and theories. This priority has implications for the way Scripture is used in relation to other forms of knowledge when dealing with issues of doctrine and obedience. While all available pertinent knowledge and experiences should inform thinking about such matters, the priority accorded to what is known of God through the Holy Scripture cannot be surrendered.

Since God is creator of all things, respect for the priority of Scripture does not exclude but requires respect or the subordinate relative authority of such secular disciplines as the natural sciences psychology, sociology, philosophy, economic and political research. Yet the priority of Scripture is compromised when Scripture is forced to conform or made subordinate to personal likes or dislikes; to any psychology, political, economic, or philosophical ideology, program, or method; to the authority of human reason and logical consistency in general; or to personal or collective experience.

The Use of Knowledge

The way in which the biblical testimony should be used needs to be thought out in the light of contemporary claims, insights, and theories that bear on the question. Scripture as norm does not exhaust or limit what faith needs to know in seeking the most faithful course of obedience and confession. The knowledge generated by observation and research can helpfully inform the thinking of faith. It aids the interpreter of biblical material in discriminating between faith and the world view in which faith is expressed in biblical texts. It helps to define the character and complexity of the problem under consideration, furnishes resources with which believers can communicate in contemporary culture, and assists in forming responses that engage the real milieu in which the church exists.

Of course it should not too easily be assumed that current conclusions, claims, and theories on any subject are reliable. All human learning and opinion is tentative and incomplete. Its reliability must be tested with care, and the influence of fads, trends, modes of opinion and the like must be resisted critically. It is also possible that faith guided by Scripture and available knowledge may conflict. In that case, faith must hold to the guidance of Scripture while searching for better understanding and knowledge.

The Use of Experience

The use of Scripture in deliberating and deciding questions of faith and life is theological work done in and for the church. The context is the community of faith. The entire company of believers is both a resource and a participant in the process. Questions about how faith is to be held, understood, and practiced arise in the life of believers seeking to be faithful in the lives they live and in the world in which they exist.

Out of their individual and corporate experience members of the church become sensitive to dimensions of Scripture not previously discerned. These questions and insights, when offered for corporate consideration, can spur and illuminate the church to different and deeper understanding of Scripture.

Therefore, the church in its institutional life must not discount the experience of its members, but hear their questions and receive their insights as opportunities to read Scripture again in the continuing search for positions and patterns of contemporary faithfulness. For their part, individuals and groups should not allow their own concerns and convictions to isolate them within the community or use them to judge the church in self-righteousness. Instead, they should bring them patiently and insistently to the church to ask whether the larger community of believers can confirm or correct or share their understanding of Scripture.

The Centrality of Jesus Christ

It is in Jesus Christ that God deals decisively with humanity and constitutes the church. This affirmation implies that all Scripture is to be interpreted in light of the centrality of Christ and in relation to the salvation provided through him. This principle requires a use of Scripture that recognizes Jesus Christ as its center; though not one that regards every text as a witness to Jesus.

No understanding of what Scripture teaches us to believe and do can be correct that ignores or contradicts the central and primary revelation of God and God's will through Jesus Christ made known through the witness of Scripture. Without implying a Word within the Word or a canon within a canon, and without rejecting the authority of the parts of Scripture that are not explicitly christological, this principle insists that all of Scripture should be understood with reference to the central revelation of God in Christ. At the most direct level of application, this principle means that any teaching of the Bible on a matter of faith or life is to be used in a manner consistent with scriptural accounts of Jesus' own teaching and embodiment of the person and will of God.

The Brief Statement of Faith

In life and in death we belong to God.
Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit,
we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel,
whom alone we worship and serve.

We trust in Jesus Christ,
Fully human, fully God.
Jesus proclaimed the reign of God:
preaching good news to the poor
and release to the captives,
teaching by word and deed
and blessing the children,
healing the sick
and binding up the brokenhearted,
eating with outcasts,
forgiving sinners,
and calling all to repent and believe the gospel.
Unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition,
Jesus was crucified,
suffering the depths of human pain
and giving his life for the sins of the world.
God raised Jesus from the dead,
vindicating his sinless life,
breaking the power of sin and evil,
delivering us from death to life eternal.

We trust in God,
whom Jesus called Abba, Father.
In sovereign love God created the world good
and makes everyone equally in God's image
male and female, of every race and people,
to live as one community.
But we rebel against God; we hide from our Creator.
Ignoring God's commandments,
we violate the image of God in others and ourselves,
accept lies as truth,
exploit neighbor and nature,
and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.
We deserve God's condemnation.

Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation.
In everlasting love,
the God of Abraham and Sarah chose a covenant people
to bless all families of the earth.
Hearing their cry,
God delivered the children of Israel
from the house of bondage.
Loving us still,
God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant.
Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child,
like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home,
God is faithful still.

We trust in God the Holy Spirit,
everywhere the giver and renewer of life.
The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith,
sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor,
and binds us together with all believers
in the one body of Christ, the Church.
The same Spirit
who inspired the prophets and apostles
rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture,
engages us through the Word proclaimed,
claims us in the waters of baptism,
feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation,
and calls women and men to all ministries of the church.
In a broken and fearful world
the Spirit gives us courage
to pray without ceasing,
to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,
to unmask idolatries in Church and culture,
to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,
and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.
In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,
we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks
and to live holy and joyful lives,
even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth,
praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

With believers in every time and place,
we rejoice that nothing in life or in death
can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. Amen

A Theology of Forbearance©

James Calvin Davis, Middlebury College

Donegal Presbytery, 16 March 2013

Thank you so much for inviting me here today. A couple of years ago, I wrote a book as a therapeutic response to my growing frustration with the tenor of national politics in the U.S. *In Defense of Civility* was an attempt to sketch out an alternative to the vitriol and verbal violence that increasingly characterized our public debates. It was a lament for the demise of public discourse in America, and a call to action for Americans similarly frustrated, to commit to the virtues of civility, and to demand them from our leaders. And in particular it was an argument—based in history and public philosophy—that religious communities could and should lead the way in this renewal of civility in the United States.

Since I wrote the book, we've had our moments when we've collectively given civility lip service – the aftermath of the shootings of Congresswoman Giffords and others in Arizona comes to mind. But overall I think we've seen uneven progress. Prominent political leaders have become occasional spokespersons for civility, the University of Arizona established a National Institute for Civil Discourse, several religious denominations have commended civility as expressions of civil and religious faithfulness, and many, many ordinary Americans have voiced their frustration with the unhealthy status quo. But the negative campaigning remains. The guerilla rhetorical warfare, much funded by super-PACs, remains. The character assassinations, scare tactics, and political bullying remain standard strategies of "politics as usual." The past presidential campaign saw plenty of it.

While my optimism has been tested, I remain cautiously hopeful that we might turn the corner toward a healthier civic life together. And I remain convinced that religious communities can play a pivotal role in that turnaround. Political scientists Robert Putnam and David Campbell, in their best-selling book *American Grace*, argue that religious communities remain a locus for healthy negotiation of the political difference that continues to polarize America, in part because as communities they create social networks in which people can (must) learn to live together with people who hold different convictions than they do. I think they're right about that. And I think those of us in the Church can play a particularly helpful role.

Despite its many subdivisions, the Christian Church is still arguably the largest social network in the United States. Committed together on an issue such as civility in public life, we have the potential to exercise enormous political presence. But before we can mobilize our fellow Christians and cooperate on achieving this social good, we need to right our own house. Those of us who are Protestant Christians know acutely well that we have trouble living with difference within our own churches. We position ourselves as leadership communities for civility in public life only when we begin to model it in our own lives together. And to do that, we need to see living with difference as a theological imperative, on par with those other deep convictions we hold that cause us to be estranged from one another.

When I wrote *In Defense of Civility*, I wrote it for a public audience, and so I made my pitch for religion's inclusion in public life and potential for leadership in historical and philosophical terms. But today I want to sketch out a theology, rooted in Reformed sources and principles, for living together with our difference. I want to claim that there is a mandate in Christian tradition for staying together, even with our difference, and there are theological resources in the Reformed tradition for guiding what living together in difference might look like, that don't come at the expense of a commitment to pure witness to the Gospel. This theology for living together in difference is constructed around the same civic virtues I lifted up in *In Defense of Civility*—humility, patience, integrity, and mutual respect. What I want to argue is that these four virtues not only are consistent with civic responsibility, they also are expressions of Christian faithfulness, rooted in quintessential Reformed convictions about God, the human condition, the implications of sin and grace, and the nature of the Church.

Virtues for Living Together

Among the Reformed virtues that compel us to stay together in our difference, the chief virtue among them is **humility**. That great American theologian Dirty Harry once said, "A man has got to know his limitations." Reformed Christian men and women know those limitations well, and those limitations make them humble. Humility is a Reformed virtue because it falls out of a Calvinist anthropology, a theological understanding of what it means to be human. What it means to be human is to be created as a masterpiece of God's wisdom and benevolence, but created nonetheless, with all of the limitations that come from being creatures and not God. What it means to be human is to be created as a reflection of God's goodness, only to have marred that reflection through pride and disobedience, relegating ourselves to a perpetual condition in which we turn from the good in favor of inordinate self-interest. As Christians, we call that read on the human condition "original sin."

Sin aggravates the restrictions that naturally come from our finitude and limits the confidence we can have in our knowledge of what is good and right. Sin makes us myopic, distorting our pursuit of truth with the astigmatism of self-interest and limited perspective. Calvin certainly acknowledged the way that sin distorts our understanding of God, ourselves, and the ideal human life. He wrote that Scripture provides a set of "spectacles" that help correct our vision on those fronts. But even for the Christian who enjoys the advantage of grace and the guidance of Scripture, the effects of sin remain, so that it is easy to overestimate the confidence with which we understand God's intentions for us and the world.

So even among Christians who profess a shared love of Jesus Christ and an affirmation of his Lordship, even among Christians who share a commitment to Scripture as the authoritative source for Christian belief and living, there can be honest disagreement about how to apply those commitments in this world. Peter and Paul can disagree about the importance of circumcision into the Jewish community as a prerequisite for entry into Christian fellowship. Protestant Christians can disagree on whether the Lord's Supper is properly understood as a memorial to a past event with eternal significance or the occasion of a spiritual realization of that significance. Calvinists can disagree on whether loans with interest are a violation of biblical prescription or allowable with appropriate safeguards. Presbyterians can disagree on whether the War in

Afghanistan was legitimate by the standards of just war, unjustified by those standards, or unjustified because the standards themselves are a perversion of the priority on peace that Jesus himself stood for. Presbyterians can disagree on whether the Christian standards of peace, love, and justice and the biblical importance of Israel dictate that our church comes down on the side of Israel or the Palestinians in that entrenched conflict. Presbyterians can disagree on what Christian notions of justice require in our current economic crisis. Do they require government simply to ensure structural reforms in the financial sector to provide equal opportunity for all citizens to reap the benefits of capitalism, or do they require government to guarantee a basic minimum income for everybody, underwritten by public aid?

Christians can disagree on all kinds of fronts regarding the implication of their shared allegiance to Jesus Christ and deference to Scripture. Those disagreements can be at the level of detail or in our broader positions on divisive issues like economics, war, and sexuality. But none of this disagreement surprises the community of Reformed Christians, because we subscribe to a theological anthropology that reminds us that there are limits to what we can know about what is right and true, because we are all sinful, finite human beings. So Calvinist anthropology dictates that humility be a part of our character. And a theological commitment to humility requires that we make a habit of regularly admitting the limits to our own understanding. Humility urges each of us to admit that we could be wrong in matters small and significant. You could be wrong, or I could be wrong, but in the meantime we live together and struggle together in our shared commitment to Christ, muddling through our understanding of what that obligates us to be and do in this world.

This acknowledgement of our limitations encourages humility, but it also encourages our second virtue, **patience**. A Reformed commitment to the virtue of patience is rooted both in our humble admission that our opponent may be more in the right than we are, but also in a Calvinist affirmation of the sovereignty of God. If a Reformed Christian anthropology convinces us that we cannot be overly assured that we understand God's wishes more properly than someone else, Reformed theology also assures us that God is the final arbiter of truth and that God will make the right and the good known at the end of human history. Until that time, we pursue the truth, but our tradition also commends a certain amount of patience with the slow pace of human understanding, with the mysteries of God, and with the dissenting views of others. "But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters... Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them" (1 Thessalonians 5:13-14, NSRV).

As Karl Barth and others have put it, Christians are uncomfortably aware that we live in the "now, but not yet." We live in the interim between the accomplishment of God's reign and its realization. And in this interim, we have no choice but to be patient with a certain amount of moral and theological uncertainty and disagreement, even in the church. In this interim, we have no choice but to be patient with the plodding pace of truth's unfolding, even in the church.

When we humbly and patiently engage others in conversation, despite sometimes intense disagreements, it gives us the opportunity to display another Christian virtue, **integrity**. A person

of integrity is someone who is true to herself and her convictions, when it is convenient but also when it is not. Integrity is the kind of consistency of character the apostle commends in 2 Timothy, when he urges Christian evangelists faced with changing cultural tides and “itching ears” to “proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching” (2 Timothy 4:2, NSRV). We expect the person of integrity to be allergic to hypocrisy and unafraid of prevailing winds. We expect someone of integrity to represent himself and his opponents with honesty. We expect the Christian with integrity to defend her perception of the truth with the kindness and charity we know to be Jesus imperatives. The Christian with integrity is true to faith and morals, in season and out of season.

The exercise of patience, humility, and integrity toward our fellow Christians as we wallow through our shared finitude and truncated knowledge is itself a reflection of the fourth virtue essential for living together in disagreement, mutual respect. I hesitate to use the term “mutual respect,” because it doesn’t sound very, well, theological. It sounds instead like a value rooted in a kind of Jeffersonian Enlightenment philosophy. But I can’t come up with a better term for the idea I’m trying to capture here, and the idea itself is deeply rooted in Christian theology. Respect for other human beings is an important corollary to the doctrines of creation and grace. Genesis tells us that God made us in God’s image. For more than twenty centuries, Christian theologians have been trying to identify what it is about human beings that reflect the image of God. Is it our physical resemblance, our rationality, our morality, or the fact that we are fundamentally social beings? Regardless of your favorite interpretation, the idea that we are made in the image of God represents the fundamental value every human being ought to be afforded. Calvin tells us that sin seriously distorts that image of the divine, yet we remain reflections of something valuable, something worthy of respect, even more so because God chooses to grace us despite the hideousness of our sin. In the face of extreme differences, in the presence of deep disagreements, we nonetheless show respect for one another out of respect for the *imago dei* and in imitation of the grace God extends to each of us.

And if God’s creative benevolence and gratuitous grace demand that we respect one another as human beings, how much more should we convey respect, kinship even, for one another within the church? Perhaps that’s the term we should use for this virtue, kinship, for the regard it implies is more than a generic deference. It is an investment in the well-being of the other, even the other who stands for substantially the opposite of what you think is right for the church. “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12, NSRV). The commandment isn’t to love those members of Christ’s community who substantially agree with you on important issues, with an escape clause for one’s theological opponents. The commandment doesn’t ask us to love those who are most like us, and abandon those who aren’t. We are commanded to love one another, as Christ has loved each one of us. Period. In that love commandment, as much as in the reflection of *imago dei*, lies the imperative for us to bind ourselves to one another in Christian kinship, even in the face of important disagreements.

One way that Christians can display this commitment to kinship, along with the corresponding virtues of humility and patience, is with a promise to *listen* to each other, especially to sisters and

brothers who disagree with them. Sometimes we in the Church are pretty good at listening to one another, sometimes not. But listening is an expression of all three of these virtues, and it's an essential practice in a community committed to living together with difference. Much of the world around us claims that shouting matches and personal attacks count as "debate." Christian humility and patience and kinship, by contrast, insist that we listen to our theological opponents, taking the time to really hear what they believe, why they believe it, and what they find mistaken or hurtful in our own convictions. We listen this way in the hopes that we might learn from them, because we are humble enough to recognize that we have no corner market on Christian truth. We listen this way as an exercise in patience, confident that the God of history will reveal everything to us in God's time, which gives us the room to fumble through together with our partial understandings. Most of all, we listen this way as an expression of kinship and respect for our conversation partner, that no matter how much we disagree with them we honor them as a fellow Christian and child of God.

That honor we show them does not necessarily require endorsement of their beliefs. That's why I've approached this question as one regarding living together in disagreement. Not resolving, ignoring, obliterating, or triumphing over our disagreement, but living with it. This is the hard part of living in a pluralistic democracy. This is the hard part about living in a church with different conceptions of the Gospel truth. But precisely because it is our hard reality, it is the challenge placed before us. And I believe the four virtues of civility I've outlined this morning—among other moral habits—give us a chance to navigate that difference faithfully.

Christian Forbearance

Ultimately, I believe living with disagreement in Christian faithfulness is a biblical project. Scripture gives a name (or at least some translations of it do) to the project, a term I've become increasingly fond of: **forbearance**. "Forbearance" literally means to delay a negative reaction to another's action, inaction, or presence, to tolerate or indulge another. In the Bible, forbearance sometimes depicts God's relationship with us; divine grace is God's abdication of a negative reaction to our sinful actions. Correspondingly, then, the New Testament virtues often include forbearance as a component of Christian character. As God exercises forbearance toward us, so we ought to exercise forbearance toward others. And that forbearance is often more specifically characterized as patience, gentleness, humility, and self-control toward others whom we perceive to be in the wrong.

In light of what we have said about the claims of Calvinist anthropology, theology, and a doctrine of grace, it seems appropriate to suggest that Reformed virtue requires a certain willingness to tolerate those who claim to share our allegiance with Jesus Christ but understand the implications of that allegiance in very different ways. Given that we must admit the limits to our own confidence in what we believe right and true, given that God has assured us that God will make clear that truth in God's own time but that we must be patient with that time, given that we acknowledge something of value in every person, certainly every Christian, regardless of the errors we believe them guilty of, it seems appropriate to extend our fellow Christians the benefit of our doubt, our tolerance, even in matters of stark disagreement.

"Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you" (Luke 6:37-38a).

Christian forbearance acknowledges that in our quest to protect the unity of the church, we may find ourselves sharing fellowship with sisters and brothers whom we believe hold incorrect convictions on important matters of faith and morals. But the discovery of that disagreement should not automatically lead to a break in our fellowship. Instead, there is a place for Christian forbearance, for tolerating the disagreement, for tolerating what we personally consider error in the church. This commendation of forbearance is not just a reflection of our realistic theological anthropology. It is also a reflection of our ecclesiology. For the Reformed tradition has always acknowledged a distinction between the perfection of the invisible church and the muddiness of the visible church. The Reformed tradition has always acknowledged that the visible church will always be a mixture of wheat and tares, right thinking and misguided theology, and that we are specifically commanded by Jesus himself not to be overly zealous in ripping out the weeds (or separating ourselves from them), so as not to endanger the garden itself.

When I'm not talking about civility and respectful disagreement, I'm a student of Roger Williams, that 17th century Puritan who managed to get himself kicked out of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and consequently formed the colony of Rhode Island and became America's first prominent voice for religious freedom. Interestingly, what got Roger Williams booted from the Bay Colony was not just (or even primarily) his insistence that the powers of church and state should be separate. What got him into trouble with his fellow Puritans was his ecclesiology. The Puritans had transplanted themselves to the New World in order to construct a holy society as a beacon of righteousness to the Christian world. But most of them had no intention of renouncing their parent church, the Church of England. Instead, their colony was meant to continue their efforts to reform their church from within. But Williams disagreed with this tactic, and the theology behind it. Williams believed that the fundamental characteristic of the church was its purity, and that in order to maintain their purity Puritan congregations had to sharply and explicitly denounce the Church of England and remove themselves to their own fellowship. For Williams, the Puritan Christians could not be real Christians as long as they shared fellowship with the sin-laden Church of England.

John Cotton, one of the religious leaders of the Bay Colony, strongly disagreed. And among his reasons for disagreeing was his insistence that Williams subscribed to a bad ecclesiology. Cotton pointed to the Bible, pointed to Jesus' parable of the wheat and tares, pointed to Paul's plea for unity within the churches he wrote to, and he charged Williams with threatening the unity and health of God's church in his misguided zeal for purity. He wrote this to Williams:

We confess the errors of men are to be contended against, not with reproaches, but the sword of the Spirit; but on the other side, the failings of the Churches (if any be found) are not forthwith to be healed by separation. It is not surgery, but butchery, to heal every sore in a member with no other medicine but abscission from the body.ⁱ

Cotton insisted that theologically it was a more faithful balance of concern for purity and concern for unity to work for the reform of the church from within, rather than breaking the church apart. “The way of separation is not a way that God hath prospered,” he wrote. As a scholar, I am a big fan of Roger Williams’s writings on freedom of conscience and the separation of church and state. But on the question of ecclesiology, John Cotton was the more faithfully Calvinist of the two. While separation into pure enclaves may be a strategy consistent with Anabaptist principles, John Cotton echoes more accurately the Reformed tradition’s acknowledgement that the visible church will always be a weedy garden, and our challenge is to carefully tend to that garden from within.

Toward that effort, Christian forbearance is essential. Faced with the reality of a church that hosts substantial disagreement, an ability to tolerate that disagreement is key to protecting the wholeness and health of the church. Faced with a church in which we cannot be completely certain of the truth but can be certain that some of us will hold different interpretations of the truth of Christ, the Reformed virtues of humility, patience, kinship, and forbearance are essential to our faithfulness. As the Apostle pleaded with the Ephesians,

I therefore, a prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort 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 of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.ⁱⁱ

Life Together in the Midst of Disagreement

What I’m trying to sketch here today is a view of the virtuous life from a Reformed perspective, one that recognizes living together in disagreement as a challenge worth taking up, and a challenge that doesn’t necessarily require us to ignore our responsibility to live as holy community for Christ. Nothing in what I’ve described so far requires that we abandon the pursuit of truth in our commitment to live together. In other words, to use language I have used elsewhere, civility does not require passivity. It does not require that we substitute for our deeply held convictions a kind of noncommittal nicety. Civility requires respectful dialogue, but respectful dialogue can include respectful disagreement. Rather than insisting on an “I’m OK, you’re OK” suspension of conviction, living together in disagreement allows room for us to say to one another, “I think I’m right, and I think you’re wrong,” as long as that sentiment is followed up by another. “I think I’m right and that you’re wrong, but I love you as a Christian sister or brother, and I do not question your place next to mine at the Table of Christ.”

Living together in disagreement does not require us to ignore or whitewash that disagreement, and it does not require us to abandon the pursuit of righteous truth. How can we abandon that pursuit? It is part of our mission as the Body of Christ in the world! It is one of the Great Ends of the Church, the preservation of the truth! How can we abandon such an awesome responsibility! Living together in disagreement according to the virtues I have explored today still leaves us with the room, and the responsibility, to pursue, defend, and debate what is right and true for the

Christian life, and for the common good. We can pursue, defend, and debate truth. We should discuss, study, and pray together. We should challenge one another to defend our convictions in the light of Scripture and the wonderfully complex tradition of Christian witness. We should confront one another when we perceive distance between our convictions and the words and pattern of our Lord Jesus. We can defend, preserve, and pursue truth.

But in order to discharge that responsibility without abandoning our obligation to the unity of Christ's Church, we must find ways to pursue the truth in debate and disagreement that is respectful, patient, humble, and peaceful. We must find ways to live together in disagreement, dogged in our pursuit of what is right while bound together in grace and love. We must find ways to live together in respectful disagreement.

Now we descendants of Calvin must admit that this gift of respectful dialogue is not necessarily what we're known for. Calvinism doesn't exactly enjoy a reputation for patience and tolerance in the popular imagination. And that reputation isn't entirely based on misunderstanding. Our tradition is littered with Servetuses, Anne Hutchinsons, and Roger Williamsses—people who were cast out into proverbial or actual wildernesses (or worse) because they fostered disagreement about what others considered essential truths. Calvinism is widely regarded as an intolerant, impatient tradition of intellectual and theological hubris whose adamancy and confidence in its conception of truth leaves bodies of dissent in its wake.

But we know better, don't we? We know that ours is a complex and complicated tradition, one in which diversity of theological understanding has been a consistent characteristic. We know that despite the simplistic depiction of our tradition in American public culture, there is more to our tradition than public burnings, witch hangings, and five-point litmus tests. We know that the great minds of Reformed Christianity have commended humility, patience, respect, and forbearance as theological virtues of deep importance. And we know that when we take those theological values together, they give shape to a Reformed imperative for living together in unity and peace, despite and even because of our disagreement. We know better—we know that deep commitment to the virtues of civility are as Calvinist as the intolerance for which we are sadly better known.

Because we know this, we are well positioned to own those virtues in our own congregations, and in our denomination, and then to offer them as a gift of grace to the world. If we Presbyterians figure out some way to live virtuously in disagreement among ourselves, we position ourselves to exhibit the Kingdom of God faithfully to the world. Committing to unity in disagreement in the Church, we then can lead the world to similar commitments to civility. All of us know that our greater culture needs some leadership in this area. Our politics, media, and social culture are plagued with incivility, with an utter incapacity to have constructive conversation about the matters that divide us, without dissolving into hostility, name-calling, and scare tactics.

But I firmly believe that once Christian communities like ours clean up their own penchant for incivility, we will be well positioned to bring a message of peace to the world. Learning to live

together in disagreement in the church, we offer that template to the world around us. To do so, in the end, is part of our ministry of reconciliation to the world. The PCUSA Confession of 1967 instructs us that

To be reconciled to God is to be sent into the world as [God's] reconciling community. This community, the church universal, is entrusted with God's message of reconciliation and share [God's] labor of healing the enmities which separate [persons] from God and from each other. Christ has called the church to this mission and given it the gift of the Holy Spirit. The church maintains continuity with the apostles and with Israel by faithful obedience to [God's] call.ⁱⁱⁱ

Reinhold Niebuhr once wrote, "Whenever the followers of one political party persuade themselves that the future of the nation is not safe with the opposition in power, it becomes fairly certain that the nation's future is not safe, no matter which party rules. For such public acrimony endangers the nation's health more than any specific policies."^{iv} Clearly in our national life we are at the moment Niebuhr once feared. But we in the Christian Church hold an antidote to this disease. It is our conviction, it is our calling. Reconciled to God, we are called to help God reconcile the world to God and itself. Beneficiaries of God's graceful forbearance, we are called to share that Gospel with the world. This is our task as citizens and as people of faith.

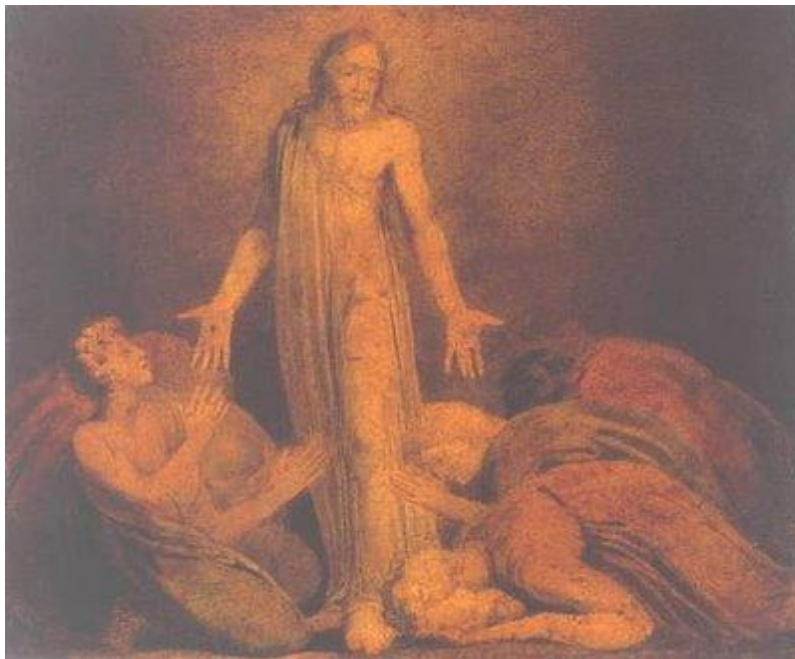
ⁱ Cotton, correspondence, 220.

ⁱⁱ Ephesians 4:1-6.

ⁱⁱⁱ Confession of 1967, 9.31. Later the Confession states directly that "congregations, individuals, or groups of Christians who exclude, dominate, or patronize their fellowmen, however subtly, resist the Spirit of God and bring contempt on the faith which they profess" (9.44).

^{iv} Reinhold Niebuhr, "Democracy and the Party Spirit" (1954), in *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1957, 66.

THE PRAYER OF JESUS CHRIST FOR US: JOHN 17



The Risen Christ Appearing to the Disciples, William Blake

After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, 'Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

'I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have



Head of Christ, Rembrandt von Rijn

given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

'I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they

may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

‘Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.’

Upside Down Sunset, Daniel Bonnell